

TEARS OF THE ORACLE



JUSTIN RICHARDS

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'BENNY, YOU'RE ILL. LET US HELP YOU. WE ANT TO HELP YOU. REALLY WE DO. THIS PARANOIA, THESE DELUSIONS. WHAT YOU'VE DONE - IT'S DRIVEN YOU INSANE. NOBODY WANTS TO HURT YOU. WE'RE YOUR FRIENDS.'

On Dellah, the shattered former home of Bernice Summerfield, only the Advanced Research centre survives - the last remnant of the once famous university. But it's under siege from fanatical groups of religious inquisitors, searching for new converts or dangerous heretics.

Benny would have to be mad to go back.

Jason Kane, Bernice's one-time husband and all-time opportunist, has found the ancient remains of the Oracle of the Lost on an obscure planetoid known only as KS-159. Or so he says.

Benny would have to be mad to believe him.

The mysterious Irving Braxiatel is looking for somewhere quiet to house his huge collection of... everything.

Benny would have to be mad to suggest KS-159.

The Oracle of the Lost, legend says, can answer any question. But the cryptic answers she gives are never helpful, and often dangerous.

Benny would have to be mad to reawaken her.

Or ask a question.

Or believe the answer.

T H E N E W
A D V E N T U R E S

JUSTIN RICHARDS lives and writes in Warwick, within sight of the castle. According to legend. You can probably find more information at www.braxiatek.com. But you'd have to be mad to look.

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Barely visible at the back of the temple – the focal point – was the Oracle. As Benny stared up, shielding her eyes in an attempt to get a slightly better view, she could just see the massive golden statue, sitting on a huge stone throne. An impossibly beautiful woman dressed in a thin white robe of the type beloved by heroines in Ray Harryhausen movies. Unlike the temple, the Oracle seemed, at a distance, untouched by the ravages of time.

The temple stonework had fared less well, Benny could see as she approached. It was once carved with inscriptions and bas-reliefs. It had once been festooned (if that was the right word) with statuary and shone brilliant white like ivory. There were hints of this still, but now the stonework was cracked, the colour faded, the carvings worn smooth by time and the relentless, inexorable attention of the elements.

T H E N E W

A D V E N T U R E S

TEARS OF THE ORACLE
Justin Richards

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Bernice Summerfield was originally created by Paul Cornell

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For Alison, Julian and Christian

Though they're not all up to reading it yet...

FINALE

The faint trace of the bloodstains was still visible in one corner, by the desk unit. Where he had died. Where she had killed him. Papers were strewn across the floor, the bed pushed up against the door as a makeshift barricade.

She was sitting on the floor, cross-legged. Gun in hand, nursing it as if it were her only friend. The barrel was still warm.

'There's nothing like having a home,' she said quietly, 'an infrastructure you can rely on, to make you take things for granted. Friends, for example. Former friends. Colleagues. People you trusted, relied on. You only appreciate them when they're not there any more. When they're gone, taken from you or set aside. Not trustworthy, suborned. Whatever. It's not even that you miss them sometimes, just that they're not there any more.'

'Then how can you tell when a friend is a friend?' he asked. 'Being only a machine I have no concept of friendship, though I understand loyalty to an extent.'

'I don't know. Nobody does, I guess. It's all down to trust. Faith. Belief. That's the problem, isn't it? Edward Watkinson knew that, that's what he was trying to say in his final lecture. I don't think he was even saying he should have trusted Mikelz's judgement, should have believed in his vision and given him the funding. I don't think he regretted that at all. He was working in his friend's best interests, only his friend didn't see it that way. Didn't appreciate it.' She bit her lip, thinking about what she had just said.

The gun was heavy in her hand, but she was not about to put it down. She would need it soon, she knew that now. She could see the way out of the dilemma. Either way, whoever was telling the truth, there was a single sure way out.

'I don't understand these allusions. I'm sorry.'

'That's OK. You're a good listener. I expected no more from you than that. You can't make judgement calls, or evaluate emotions, or...' She hesitated. 'Or be a friend. But you're the best friend I have right now. The others are dead, or gone, or...' Her voice tailed off.

'So, Mikelz went off on his own anyway,' she said after a while. 'He didn't appreciate what his friend tried to do for him then. Later he did, when it was too late. But at first he was filled with enthusiasm, with certainty. He was so sure. So certain that he took his colleague and his wife with him.' She hefted the gun, lifting it and letting her hand fall back into the cradle of her other palm. 'And look what happened to them.'

'And to Watkinson.'

'True. But he went into it with his eyes open. He knew what he was doing. He had no alternative, really.' Benny lifted the gun, pointed it straight between her own eyes. 'Any more than I have,' she murmured.

AN ACCOUNT OF A MEETING OF THE FUNDING COUNCIL OF THE COLLOQUIAN MUSEUM OF ANCIENT ARTEFACTS

TAKEN FROM COLLOQUIAN MEMORIES,
BY DIFSON ANDERS

Whereas Watkinson was a common enough sight, being as he was on the Funding Board, I only saw Dr Mikelz the once. The joke that did the rounds was that there was not enough room in the building for both Mikelz and his ego. And that even if there were, it would prevent Watkinson and his ego from entering, and Watkinson had the prior claim.

That was unfair. At least, it was unfair to Professor Watkinson who did at least have some tangible claim to greatness. In fact, he never openly flaunted his celebrity, and though he had a reputation for referring students to his own research work and papers, I only ever heard him do it during the course of his lectures, and then only when there was no comparable work available to recommend. You have to appreciate that Watkinson had written so much that almost any study of almost any period would inevitably run across at least one of his papers if it were to have any claim to be comprehensive and complete.

But I digress. The occasion was the meeting of the Funding Council of the Museum, as I have described. On this occasion I was standing in for Professor Heathlon who was tending to his sick wife. My brief was to watch, note, and report back. No more. So I took little part in the heated discussions that revolved around Mikelz's request for Museum funding.

Not knowing their background, I had expected that Watkinson would be in favour of Mikelz's request. I had

heard they shared a mutual admiration. I had not been privy to discussions of the areas on which they did not so readily agree. Not until then.

My first appreciation of the differences between the two great archaeologists was their varied approaches to time keeping. I arrived early for the meeting, or so I thought. Being the new boy, so to speak, I was keen to make an impression, partly for Heathlon's sake but also I confess for my own advancement. Despite my brief, I was determined to make my presence felt with at least one perspicacious point that would bring my existence to the notice of the great men. So it was that I entered the meeting room a good fifteen minutes before the starting time, intending to spend the spare minutes becoming familiar with the layout and facilities as well as preparing to project an impression of diligence, motivation, and application to the task in hand. I had print-outs of the relevant claims applications and considerable supporting materials for each which I had culled from the info-highway the day before. Most of it I had even read.

But the room was not, as I had anticipated, empty. Watkinson was already there, seated at the far end of the coffin-shaped table, with papers and optical disks strewn out in front of him. With one hand he sifted through this morass of information, while with another he was tapping at a remote keyboard. Having four arms was no doubt of considerable value to him in maintaining his prolific output of learned papers and theses.

He greeted me without looking up. 'Young Anders, isn't it?' He nodded before I could answer, as if confirming his own suspicions. 'As I thought. Sit down, sit down.' He peered over his horn-rimmed spectacles at me, and waved me to a seat. His pale green eyes seemed to be fixed on me as I set down my papers and attempted, unsuccessfully, to prevent the pile from toppling over. 'I see you've been mugging up,' Watkinson said. 'Good, good. Very keen, I like that. How is she?'

I gave up trying to wrestle my papers into some sort of order, and regarded him with some puzzlement. 'Who, sir?' I enquired. I had no wife, no sisters, and I could hardly believe that Watkinson was on social terms with my mother.

'Dolares,' he said as if it were obvious. When I still gawped at him, he prompted gently: 'Professor Heathlon's wife.'

'Oh.' I tried to strike a balance between enthusiasm for the question and sadness at the answer. 'Not so good, I'm afraid, sir.'

Watkinson shook his head sadly. 'Dear, dear,' he tutted, and returned to his work.

I busied myself with arranging my own papers, glancing up occasionally, always to find the great man fully absorbed in his own business.

I say there was a contrast. It was this: whereas Professor Watkinson was early for the meeting, fully prepared and indeed with time for the social graces, Mikelz was late, ill-prepared and surly.

We had already dealt with three applications, or perhaps four, before Mikelz's turn came. And he had not yet arrived. Mallek, who was chairing the meeting, was all for calling reception to see if there was some message that had not been conveyed to us. But Watkinson was insistent that this was normal behaviour for Mikelz. He was, Watkinson informed us, always late.

When he did eventually grace us with his presence, Mikelz had no prepared presentation and provided no background papers. He seemed to think that we should grant his funding on the basis of his own reputation and the few notes on the application form alone. If nothing else, this suggested to me that he was a poor judge of character. From what little I had observed of my fellow committee members (for I was already thinking of myself as a full partner in this allocation of Museum money), they were more likely to look kindly on those projects whose proponents treated the committee with deference and respect. Dr Mikelz showed precious little of either.

But that was not why Watkinson was so staunch in his opposition to the expedition. In fact, I think, from some of his comments and from my own observations of the occasional twinkle in his eye, that Watkinson secretly approved of the way that Mikelz refused to be intimidated by the committee.

Indeed, it was Watkinson who was the sole voice of reason on behalf of Mikelz. But then, it must be said, only in order to quash any hope of his gaining funding. From the short conversation that I had enjoyed with him before the meeting, from my occasional attendance at his lectures, from reading his papers and theses, from his reputation and from the way he had dealt with the previous business of that self-same meeting, I have to say that I was shocked by the depth of his emotion on this particular issue. I reproduce his words here as best I can from memory, my notes of the meeting, and the rather anodyne minutes that were kept. I beg that you will pardon any inaccuracies caused by the passage of time and the waning of memory and treat this as it is intended: as an indication of Watkinson's strength of feeling on the issue.

Professor Watkinson looked up from the application form he had been studying, and removed his spectacles. Then he looked round the table, fixing his pale eyes on each of us in turn. There was utter silence, as there always was when it was apparent that the great man was about to speak. 'I see no need for any ancillary information,' he said quietly. 'And as Dr Mikelz points out, there is in any case precious little background evidence.' He paused a moment, then added: 'For anything.' He waved the application form as he continued. 'This whole thing is really a joke, albeit hardly funny, on the part of the good doctor.'

There was a flutter of conversation round the table. Mikelz was staring at Watkinson, his face a mixture of resignation and suppressed anger.

'After all,' Watkinson was saying, 'we all know the legends, the *stories* as well as Dr Mikelz does. As does any child. The so-called Oracle of the Lost. Supposedly one of the great wonders of the ancient universe, a huge statue in the form of a beautiful woman. A statue given, we are asked

to believe, to prophecy, to foretelling the future.’ He shook his head as if in sadness. ‘Are we now, grown men - academics and scholars all - to believe that Dr Mikelz has succeeded where so many starry-eyed children and book-worm adventurers have failed? Are we to believe that with just a little money from our good selves - forgive me,’ he re-examined the form, ‘rather a lot of money from our good selves - Dr Mikelz can conjure this oracle out of his archaeological hat? Are we to believe that it can even be proved to exist? Gentlemen, ladies, Dr Mikelz may be unable to tell the difference between myth and reality, between legend and artefact, but let us not ourselves be drawn into this delusion that Delfus-Orestes actually existed. Does anyone want to propose, for example, that we suddenly ascribe authenticity and veracity to the *Riedel Manuscript* and give credence to its description of the Fountain of Forever?’ He gave a short laugh at this. Some of the others joined in, following his cue. ‘Dr Mikelz may wish us to believe that the Delfan leaders did indeed on occasion travel across space from Delfus-Clytaemnestra to an obscure rock to consult an all-seeing oracle on any matter which took their fancy. He may wish us to think that this oracle actually existed and its remains are waiting for him to unearth them on some godforsaken asteroid halfway across the cosmos. He may even, I am afraid, believe some of this himself.’

Mikelz was speaking now, trying to talk over Watkinson. ‘But I have found it,’ he was protesting. ‘The evidence is there, the Oracle exists. It is waiting only for us to unearth it.’

‘Only?’ Watkinson said, his voice rising over Mikelz’s protestations. ‘Only? Unearthing things is the whole point of archaeology. You cannot *know* until you have dug it up. Or spent forever and a week failing to dig it up.’

‘It is my time.’

‘And the Museum’s money.’

I could not hear much of what either of them said for a while as things degenerated into something of a shouting match, and my notes are confused. ‘One fine wine’, I have

written Mikelz as saying, and 'Careless'. But to what he referred, if indeed this is what he was trying to say, I know not.

There can be no doubt of the result, however. Funding was unanimously refused and Mikelz stormed out.

'Very well,' he shouted as he gathered up his papers and stuffed them into his bag. 'I shall go to Delfus-Orestes without your help. I can finance a small expedition myself. I had thought that as curators and academics you had some interest in the mysteries of the past.'

'The only mystery we shall be watching eagerly to see solved,' Watkinson retorted, 'is how you can possibly believe that an outing to an asteroid with a bucket and spade, your wife and, I presume, the ever-loyal Mr Gregor can constitute an archaeological expedition.'

There was considerable laughter at this comment, though much of it was a letting of nervous energy.

'I shall do better without your help,' Mikelz said in reply. 'You know nothing about this matter. Your minds are closed to the wonder and mystery of the ages, and for that if nothing else you have my sympathy.' And with this he was gone, slamming the door loudly behind him.

Two days later he did indeed leave with his wife and Gregor. I gather that Watkinson saw them off, and that they exchanged messages on several occasions in the weeks that followed. It certainly seemed that despite their difference of professional opinion, the friendship between Watkinson and Mikelz was not irreparably damaged. But, of course, we shall never know since, as we are all aware, Mikelz never returned.

CONVERSATIONS

Somewhere within the superstructure of the huge Dyson Sphere that enclosed the star that gave the People their light, an angel spoke with God.

The angel was actually a collection of data equations and mathematical emulations that had once been a Ship. Probably. Now it was reborn as Gabriel, though he preferred to go by the name given him by Professor Bernice Summerfield over sherry: Clarence. And God was the supercomputer that, for want of a better description, oversaw and organized the lives of the People. And the People, the organic ones, the Ships and droids, and the few hybrid entities like Clarence, lived in the Worldsphere. And the somewhere that most of God 'lived', at least for most of the time, was a moon called Whynot. Though nobody knew why that was.

'Peace in our time,' Clarence said as he clutched the sheet of paper that represented the new treaty the People had agreed with another powerful race.

'Don't you believe it,' said God, who at this moment was representing himself as a small yellow floating spheroid about the size of a cannonball. With a large smiley face on it. The face winked.

'Then why the new treaty?' Clarence asked. 'I don't understand.'

The sphere bobbed in a fair approximation of a shrug. 'Who knows. They move in even more mysterious ways than I do.' A pause. 'That's a joke by the way.'

'Oh. So you think there will still be a war?'

'Probably. Eighty-seven per cent probably, according to my simulations. And other data.'

Clarence digested this information. Which meant in effect he assimilated it and filed it within his own storage systems,

establishing cross-links to similar data, contrary data, and some random data as well in an effort to simulate the prerequisites for organic intuition. 'So why the treaty stuff?' he asked again.

'Nobody wants a war. And thirteen per cent is thirteen per cent, however unlucky you reckon that to be. Besides, they haven't given us much leeway. No more than they could get away with really.'

Clarence unfolded his wings, stretched them, then folded them away again. 'They have said we can develop our own: time-travel,' he pointed out

'And they know it's within our capabilities to do it. And they also know that in time, if you'll forgive the phrase, we shall. They know that from the unfortunate Babylon incident, among other things.'

'I don't remember the last war,' Clarence said slowly. He knew that he had been involved in it, but that was part of the former self that was lost to him. His past was largely a blank. No memory before being an angel. Nothing Pre-Raphaelite, Benny had once told him. That was a joke too, apparently.

'We shall be more prepared this time,' God said. His voice was soft, quiet. 'Forewarned is forearmed. And there are certain precautions we can take. I can take. Like I said, I have some data, some knowledge of what and who is key.' The mouth on the smiley face twisted upward still further at the edges. 'Put your trust in God,' it said. 'By the way, where is your new friend?'

'You're the all-seeing one,' Clarence told the sphere. 'You tell me.'

'All right. He's talking with !Cin-ta!x.' The sphere bobbed again. 'Why is that, do you suppose?'

!Cin-ta!x was in his kitchen when B-Aaron came calling. The form the visitor took was long and thin, dangerously close to looking like a projectile — which was appropriate for a worship's remote drone. A facial icon was apparently etched on to the front, except that it jutted out over the edges.

'I heard you were back,' B-Aaron said through the drone. 'Looks like you and your Temporal Interest Group chums will be in favour again now. You've heard about the new treaty, I take it?'

'No,' said !Cin-ta!x without looking up from the pancakes he was making. 'Who are you?'

'B-Aaron,' the drone said. 'I'm a VAS, in case you can't tell.'

Now !Cin-ta!x did look up, just for a moment. His eyes were the colour of straw. He ran a hand through his blue hair, pushing it away from his pale forehead. 'And what does a Very Aggressive Ship want with me?' he asked. 'I'm afraid I'm a bit pushed for —'

'Time?' the ship interrupted. 'There's irony for you.'

!Cin-ta!x sighed and removed the pan from the heat. From outside came the sound of children laughing, punctuating the momentary silence within the kitchen. !Cin-ta!x stared at the drone, as if hoping it might just give up and leave. When it didn't, he said: 'All right, so there's a new treaty. Yes, I'd heard. That's why God brought me back here as you well know. And yes, God's suddenly after our help with temporal engineering rather than tactfully suggesting we give it up and...' His voice tailed off as he tried to decide what he was encouraged to do.

'Make pancakes?' the ship suggested. 'In the nude?' The drone tilted forward slightly as if examining !Cin-ta!x's milky-pale body.

'If you like.'

'If God likes, surely.' The drone angled its facial end up again slightly, which imparted the same sort of impression as a human wrinkling its nose in disgust. 'Don't worry. He can't hear us. My stealth systems are pretty much unrivalled.'

'Pretty much?' !Cin-ta!x asked.

'Well,' B-Aaron conceded, 'if there was anyone better equipped, I wouldn't know about it, would I? So best not to get too cocky, just in case.'

!Cin-ta!x sat down at the table and regarded B-Aaron's remote with a mixture of unease and excitement. 'I assume

you didn't pop round for pancakes,' he said. 'Hardly worth incurring the wrath of You Know Who by shielding yourself from Him for that.' He raised an eyebrow. 'You want to know how the time-travel experiments are going, perhaps? Want to know why I'm cooking rather than solving wave equations and redefining our knowledge of temporal physics?'

'That'll do for a start.'

'Well, the truth is that this stuff isn't as easy as God thinks. He's getting round to it now, though. He's beginning to realize that you can't just throw a billion scientists at the problem and have a solution by teatime. Though He's rather preoccupied running simulations and getting data for the war. If there is one.'

'Problems then?' The drone bobbed about as if it had thought as much.

'A few. But they're biggies. Not likely to be solved any time soon, unless one of us pops back from the future to give us a clue.' He stood up again, and put the pan back over the heat. 'And even the new treaty has a few things to say about *that* sort of behaviour.'

The drone was silent for a while, as if considering this information. Then, ignored by !Cin-ta!x, it floated slowly back towards the door. It paused a moment on the threshold. 'Not likely to be solved soon, then? Not before the war if there is one?'

!Cin-ta!x grunted. Then he turned to face the drone, brandishing a wooden spoon that dripped batter on to the tiled floor. 'Maybe. Maybe not. God says He's got access to some other technology. He's found something that may help.'

'Really? And what's that?'

But !Cin-ta!x was back at the stove, removing a pancake and pouring in a fresh supply of batter. 'I don't know. He didn't say. But he's got some off-worlder, someone from outside the People, offering advice.'

'Benny, perhaps,' B-Aaron said, almost to itself. It knew better than most how God had used Bernice Summerfield in the past.

‘Don’t think so.’ !Cin-ta!x seemed more thoughtful now. ‘Rumour is it’s a man. And anyway, God says that Benny is key to winning the war. Her and some guy called Brax-something-or-other.’

‘Oh?’ The drone did a rather bad job of hiding the ship’s Interest in this.

But !Cin-ta!x had apparently lost interest in the gossip already. ‘God has some plan or other,’ he mumbled at the hatter. ‘He always does. Best just to let Him get on with it.’

Clarence frowned. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said. ‘Just a chat, I’m sure.’

‘Then why shield the conversation? It’s not just that he doesn’t want to be overheard accidentally. He actively doesn’t want Me to listen.’ God’s voice sounded entirely reasonable. ‘Perhaps,’ He suggested, ‘!Cin-ta!x has a new recipe he’s keeping to himself.’

‘Do you want me to ask him?’

God considered. Then He said: ‘No, I don’t think so. But by all means let B-Aaron know I’m interested. If he should want a little chat with Me, he knows where I am.’ The yellow God-sphere spun slowly on its axis, with the unsettling effect that the face seemed to be sliding round it. ‘Will you be seeing Benny? I have something for her.’

Clarence frowned. ‘I don’t know. Some time, I’m sure.’ And he found he was holding a small box. ‘Thank you.’

‘No urgency. Whenever.’ The sphere swung round lazily so that it was facing away from Clarence. ‘I do enjoy our little talks,’ God said quietly. And Clarence realized that this was an invitation to leave.

As he made his way out of the void, he barely noticed the tall thin figure standing in the shadows by the corridor of light that served as structure. His mind was taken up with wondering what B-Aaron was playing at. And what God thought B-Aaron was playing at. And what God was going to do about it. And whether there would be war. Somewhere deep inside him, aural sensors picked up and stored the faint

voices from the void behind. Comments that later would haunt him.

‘Ah, there you are,’ God was saying. ‘Good of you to come back. I’ve been considering the problem, and we can now embark on a course of action. Kill several birds with one stone, so to speak. Tell me, how do you fancy returning to KS-159?’

FAITH HEALING

The braziers provided patches of smoky light dotted across the quadrangle outside B-Block. Small groups of people huddled round them in an effort to escape the cold of the night. Now that the power was off and the interiors of the buildings were restricted to authorized personnel, this was the only place there was any hope of warmth.

It was by one of the braziers that Javez started his preaching. Standing illuminated by the orange flickering light, feeling the warmth on his face, he announced the existence of the one true god, the only faith. He exhorted his fellows to convert, to join him. And when none of them seemed particularly impressed, he explained and demonstrated how heretics were dealt with.

Despite his obvious faith, despite his acknowledgement of the True Way, he was being tested. The forces of evil were after him, were calling on him to surrender. But to give up to them was to deny the faith. And the faith was everything.

There were three of them, their dark armour rendering them almost invisible in the smoke-filled night. There was just the occasional gleam of gunmetal, the vague outline of the huge reptilian form, the flicker of firelight reflected in the shields set directly into their wrinkled faces to cover their alien eyes. The rasping breath they drew as they approached.

The Neo-Aretians were fast despite their bulk and their apparent gasping for breath. Javez kept to the shadows as he ran, shunned the firelight and hugged the darkness. If he could just make it through the next quadrangle, he would be at the wall. Then he could follow it along until he reached the gates. Outside, the faithful were gathered, waiting. He knew. He would open the gates, let them in. Then the process of conversion could really begin. He would be the saviour of all those who even now shunned the True Faith, who hid away

from the gods within the walls of the Advanced Research Department of what had once been St Oscar's University.

One more time, one more dash across an illuminated area and he was there. Javez braced himself, ready to run.

But even-as he pushed away from the shadows of the building, a large figure stepped out in front of him. With a shout of rage and determination, Javez dropped his shoulder and slammed into the figure as hard as he could. It barely moved, and Javez stumbled and fell. At once he was up again, clutching his bruised shoulder and running, sprinting for the shelter of the wall.

The figure was turning, tracking Javez as he ran, raising its blaster. 'Stop,' the figure shouted, its voice dry, a husky rasp of breath. But Javez kept running. Almost there now. Almost.

Then another figure stepped from the shadows by the wall. Its blaster was also raised, pointing straight at Javez. But he kept running.

'You deny the Faith,' he screamed as he clawed at the armour, trying to get a purchase on the surface, trying to rip his way inside, hammering at the chest plate with his fists. 'Repent and be saved,' he shouted as the Neo-Aretian knocked him aside.

The blast took Javez full in the chest as he stood up, sending him flying backward again. He somersaulted across the quad, landing on his back. The stars stared down at Javez, pin-prick lights peeping through the black velvet sky. Then they were blotted out by the massive figure that leant over him.

'A waste. Another life wasted.' Commander Skutloid shook his head sadly as he stared down at the body.

Behind him Garshal coughed politely. 'He was afflicted. Commander. He set fire to four people, two of them children. These madmen must be rooted out.'

Skutloid turned away from the body, opening a comms channel to the War Room. 'Rogue eliminated,' he reported. 'No further casualties reported.'

Drexton had joined them now and the three Neo-Aretians that made up the Advanced Research Department's makeshift security force started back towards the main block.

'How much longer. Commander?' Drexton asked. 'There are more rogue fanatics every day. How long before they are all fanatics?'

'Silvera's alpha-wave suppressors seem effective for the most part,' Garshal said. 'Until their power packs are exhausted.'

'There are only so many power packs,' Drexton pointed out. 'The others, the Golls and humans, all the other life forms... none of them have the protection we enjoy.'

When the madness, the killing had started, Skutloid, Garshal and Drexton had been lucky to be at the Advanced Research Department. They were running scenarios through the ARD's battle computers, preparing a course on strategic initiatives for Skutloid's lectures the following term. Their armour, in particular the wave-shielding built into their helmets, had afforded them protection against the strange impulses and sudden desires which had affected everyone else on Dellah. For a while they had imagined they would be the only ones not affected. Being in the ARD they had missed the evacuation which had removed those who held out longest against the gods and their influence. But they were at least in sane company. Director Silvera's devices seemed to hold the madness at bay. Occasionally at first, but more and more frequently now, rogue fanatics emerged and tried to first convert and then kill the 'heretics' who defied or ignored them. Skutloid's task was to root them out, to keep the ARD sane and secure.

The logic behind it was simple. Everyone else was on the research staff. Skutloid and his comrades were Neo-Aretians. They were soldiers by upbringing, by habit, and by inclination. They could keep order. They could protect everyone. War was their business.

But this wasn't war. This was madness. And the parallels between the religious fervour outside the ARD where the

roving inquisitions sought out and killed those they considered to be heretics, and inside where Skutloid sought out and neutralized rogue fanatics, were not lost on him. Nor was the fact that if the emergence of rogue fanatics continued to increase as it had done, it would not be long before the three of them were the only ones left.

The War Room had been Santos Silvera's private conference room. It adjoined his office, and he was rarely away from it. He had not slept for three days, and the strain and fatigue was obvious in the Director's face as well as his temper.

The main table was now taken up with a relief model of the surrounding area. The ruins of the university buildings were small styrofoam models while the Advanced Research Department itself was depicted in the centre as a relatively unscathed area. Most of the buildings were shown as still standing, which was accurate. What was not shown was the general deterioration of living standards within those buildings. The War Room itself was a typical example. The room had not been cleaned for over a month. The floor was spread with litter through which the bloodstains from the first few days still showed. The furniture was mostly damaged from the fighting. The table itself had one of its legs shored up with broken fibreboard.

Still, at least they had cleared away the bodies, Skutloid reflected as he entered the room. He watched Director Silvera and his headquarters staff rearrange the coloured counters that represented the various religious factions. For all the good it did them to know that some neo-fundamentalists were camped outside the main gates, or that the ana-atheist group had sent an inquisitionary force to the south perimeter.

'We remain secure,' Silvera said as he caught sight of Skutloid. 'Good.' He returned his attention to the table.

'For the moment,' Skutloid hissed. 'There will be other rogues, other attempts to open the gates or breach the walls.'

‘Then you will deal with them, Commander.’ The Director did not look up from the relief map as he spoke. It was to him a simple restatement of fact.

‘We should not be complacent,’ Skutloid said, the anger apparent in his voice. ‘These incidents are increasing in frequency.’ He drew in a loud, scraping breath. ‘There are no ships left and the spaceport is in ruins. There can be no escape. We should send for help.’

Silvera did look at Skutloid now. ‘We’ve been through this before,’ he sighed. ‘I will not jeopardize my people by drawing attention to ourselves with a comms emission. Who knows what factions might intercept it, might offer their “help”?’

‘We cannot hold out here for ever,’ Skutloid protested. He was aware of Garshal and Drexton standing either side of him, and was grateful for their tacit support.

‘We don’t need to. This thing will burn itself out like any illness. Things will settle down eventually. We just need to sit it out. Nobody is coming to help - we know from monitoring the local news services that Dellah is in quarantine again. A message will serve no purpose. Nobody would come even if they believed it were a genuine message and not a ploy to pass on this madness to other worlds.’

‘How can you be sure?’ Skutloid asked quietly. ‘How can you be sure this thing will ever stop? How can you be sure that no one will help us? How can you know when you will not try?’

Silvera shook his head sadly, coming round the table. He stood directly in front of Skutloid, then reached up and grasped the huge figure’s shoulders. Skutloid looked down at the silver-haired man, and saw the determination in his eyes, the certainty. ‘We shall win through victorious,’ Silvera said quietly. ‘But I need your help. We must all work together for this one goal, for our survival.’ He smiled thinly. ‘We must all keep the faith,’ he said.

And in that moment, Skutloid knew that they were already lost. ‘Of course, Director,’ he said. ‘The faith.’

Silvera nodded, letting go of Skutloid. ‘I knew you would understand.’

‘Indeed I do.’ Skutloid turned, gestured for Garshal and Drexton to follow him, and strode from the room.

‘He has succumbed to this madness too,’ Garshal breathed as soon as they were alone in the corridor.

‘They are all afflicted,’ Skutloid said. ‘They all believe in Silvera. Their god is survival, escape, immunity. And in pursuing it, believing in it, they are lost.’ He set off down the corridor, his footsteps echoing heavily. ‘Come.’

‘Where to. Commander?’ Drexton asked.

‘To the Communications Suite.’

‘It is sealed off. Guarded.’

‘Then we shall reopen it,’ Skutloid said. ‘It will afford us a good defensive position while we wait for rescue.’

‘Rescue, Commander?’

Skutloid nodded. ‘There is perhaps one person who can help us.’

STORAGE FACILITY X ONE NINE

The place was heaving. Ships were arriving and leaving all the time. Cargoes were towed across the port by giant loaders which heaved the standard crates in and out of the bellies of the cargo freighters. At one end of the spaceport smaller ships were berthed - people leaving their goods for storage while they moved house, or took long vacations, or were rendered homeless by war. But the bulk of the business was with the large corporations whose heavy freighters stood across the landing areas like giant birds of prey.

Spotting anyone in the concourse was a nightmare. They were almost shoulder to shoulder. Most of the passengers were in transit, using the spaceport as a way station. But the passengers were secondary to the cargo hands and stevedores. Everywhere trucks and buggies ferried crates and packages to and fro.

In the midst of the noisy bustle and flow, one man stood alone and still. He leant against the flaking paintwork of a cracked pillar, hands in jacket pockets, and watched the steady flow of bewildered passengers who were disembarking through Gate 93. They all exhibited much the same behaviour. They stepped through the gate, paused to take in the huge size of the port building and vast number of people already there. Then they took a few steps forward, looking round all the time for signs and other clues as to where they should or could go next.

All except one. She was tall with short dark hair. She carried a small holdall and a rucksack was slung carelessly across her back, one strap over a shoulder, the other dangling free. Her face was set in a half-amused expression as she pushed through the bewildered passengers without pausing to get her bearings. She set off immediately across the concourse with the confidence of someone who has

absolutely no idea at all where they are or why they are there but doesn't much care either.

Irving Braxiatel smiled and shook his head. Then he set off at a brisk walk after the woman. He caught up with her just as she changed direction to swing into a dimly lit bar area. He followed her to a table and sat down opposite her, noting her complete lack of surprise at seeing him.

'Hello, Benny,' he said.

She smiled. 'Hi. And what brings me to this salubrious establishment at the height of the off-season?' She waved to a waitress and pointed to the absence of drink on the table in front of her. 'No, don't tell me,' she continued without pause, 'let me guess.'

Braxiatel folded his arms and waited.

'You would too, wouldn't you?' she said. 'You'd let me sit here for,' she raised her voice suddenly, 'longer than it takes to get served,' and lowered it again, 'making sarky comments and not actually enlightening me.'

The waitress arrived and stood tapping her bored stylus on her bored notepad.

'I'm pleased to see you too, Benny,' Braxiatel said; 'Thanks for coming.'

'Beer,' she said by way of answer. 'Big one.'

'Special today,' the waitress said, sounding anything but, 'is double for an extra half a dinari.'

Benny waved her hand. 'Double then. Two of them.'

'And just one for me,' Braxiatel added in case she had misunderstood the order. 'I'm glad you came,' he said again as soon as the waitress had left them.

'Free ticket,' Benny said. 'First class. Hard to resist.' She sighed. 'And I could do with a holiday.'

'I heard a rumour you went back to Dellah. For your cat.'

'Wolsey. Yes. He's in quarantine now.' She shook her head. 'This place is the absolute pits, how *did* you find it?'

'We can pick Wolsey up on our way out,' Braxiatel reassured her as the beers arrived.

Benny downed her first beer in a single pull. Then she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and grinned.

‘That’s better.’ She looked round. ‘Hardly the place for a holiday.’

‘A working holiday,’ Braxiatel said. ‘I have some of my muff in storage here. How was it?’

‘Dellah?’ She made a face. ‘Pretty dire, so far as I remember. I had a Mary-Sue, seemed like a good idea at the time.’

Braxiatel sat back as he took this in. ‘Personality transplant.’ I le raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, I can tell it was only temporary.’

‘Yeah. Not quite as temporary as I’d hoped, but there you go.’

‘You’re lucky you didn’t go. Literally, I mean.’ He took a gulp of beer. It was revolting, gassy and tasteless. ‘You never quite know what’s going to happen when you let some of those backstreet hacks get their probes inside your head. Brain damage is getting off lightly.’

‘Now you tell me.’ She started on her second beer. ‘And I thought the headaches were down to the booze. Thank God for that.’

‘So how have you been coping?’

She shrugged. ‘Jason came to get me after I went back to Dellah. Then he went off somewhere with a woman called Mira. So I went off somewhere else. I can cope on my own. I don’t need anybody. Independence, that’s the thing.’

He lifted his beer, raised his glass to her. ‘I’ll drink to that,’ he said. Then he peered more closely at the misty liquid. ‘But not here,’ he added, setting the glass gently down on the grimy table top.

They took a limo to the storage area where Braxiatel had his stuff. Benny held Wolsey, stroking his neck, reassuring him that quarantine was not a normal state of affairs now.

‘You have all your stuff, your collection, here?’ Benny asked.

‘Only some of it. I tend not to keep it all together.’ He smiled. ‘Something about eggs and baskets.’

The limo pulled into a cul-de-sac surrounded on three sides by the huge storage warehouses that seemed to cover the asteroid. The driver opened the door for Benny and Wolsey.

‘And you want me to help you catalogue it?’

‘Oh, I have a catalogue.’ They watched the limo turn and pull away into the darkness. ‘But I would welcome your help putting it into some sort of order.’ He looked round at the huge buildings, counting them off with a finger. ‘Let’s start with that one. A quick tour before dinner.’

‘I hope the hotels are better than the spaceport.’ Benny paused, realizing what he had said. ‘How many warehouses do you have here?’ she asked.

‘Seventeen,’ he said. ‘I think.’ He led the way to one and unlocked the door. Lights came on inside automatically as they went through. ‘What I want to do,’ Braxiatel was saying, ‘is set up some sort of permanent collection where people can actually see the stuff. Seems silly to keep it to myself. In boxes.’

Benny was staring around her. She could not see the end of the warehouse. There were storage crates as far as the eye could see, organized into rows with aisles between and stacked about ten high. ‘You’d need a small planet,’ she said in awe.

‘Yes. That’s what I thought.’ He held up a data crystal, small enough to fit comfortably into his palm. ‘The contents of the warehouses at this facility are catalogued on here.’

He tossed it to her and she caught it easily in her left hand. She held it up to the light for a moment, as if she could read the data structures set into the lattice inside. Then she dropped it into her jacket pocket.

‘Take a quick look,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Get an idea of the sort of things we’re dealing with. Then any suggestions as to where and how to store it, bearing in mind that’s just a fairly representative tenth or so of the whole collection’

‘OK.’ She looked round again. ‘Did you ask me here just to gloat, or is there something else here you want me to see?’

By way of answer, Braxiatel tapped his index finger in the air, turned and set off down one of the aisles. Benny set Wolsey down on the floor and set off after Braxiatel. The cat meandered slowly after them.

When he was a short way down the aisle, Braxiatel stopped in front of one of the crates and drew a key from his pocket. He inserted it into a small hole in the bottom crate of the stack, and turned it. Then he stood back.

Benny stood beside him and together they regarded the crate.

‘So?’ Benny asked.

And as she spoke, the whole front face of the stack of crates slid a couple of metres aside. Behind it was carpeted flooring, a passageway lit by subtle wall lights. Benny nodded. ‘So,’ she said, as if she had expected this.

The passageway was an entrance hall. There was a door a short way along which opened into a large drawing room. Off that, Braxiatel assured her, were three bedrooms, each with en-suite bathroom and a small study attached. There was also a fair-sized kitchen area, and from the smell of it something in the oven.

A table was laid in the drawing room. Candles, crystal glasses, three places. Benny walked all round it twice.

‘Wolsey probably won’t eat with us,’ she said at last. ‘He’s it bit choosy about the company.’

‘I have another guest,’ Braxiatel said with a smile.

Benny’s mouth dropped open. ‘Not Renee.’

He frowned. ‘That’s right,’ he said a little stiffly. ‘Not Renee.’

‘Oh. Sorry.’

He shrugged. ‘She went off with the first officer of a heavy space-hauler. Eventually. Took a while to organize, but her idea of long-term relationships and mine are, I think, somewhat different.’

‘I thought friends were for ever,’ Benny said lightly.

‘That depends on how long you live. Now,’ he went on quickly, ‘that’s your room if you want to freshen up or whatever before dinner.’

‘Whatever would be good.’

‘And I’ll see if our celebrity chef has managed not to burn the cakes.’

Benny followed him to the kitchen door. A figure was standing by the oven, staring through the glass door, wings folded across its back. He turned to face them. ‘Hello Benny,’ the angel said.

‘I brought you a present,’ Clarence told her some time later. ‘From God.’ He handed Benny the small metal box that God had given him.

‘So He knows you’re here?’ Benny pushed aside her empty coffee cup and placed the box on the table in front of her. She had seen it on a side table and wondered what it was. She dropped her napkin beside it.

‘He knew I would be seeing you,’ Clarence replied.

Benny grinned. ‘*Deus est machina.*’ She and Braxiatel both laughed - first at the joke, then at Clarence’s blank expression.

‘So why did you come, if not solely to deliver the present?’ Braxiatel asked. He reached for the coffee pot and poured himself some more. ‘You implied earlier that you had some news from the Worldsphere. From God?’

‘No,’ Clarence said slowly. ‘From the B-Aaron. He is interested in this new treaty, has been asking questions.’

Braxiatel clicked his tongue. ‘The new treaty is a diversion, I think. So is what’s happened to my people and their world. There may still be a war.’

‘You think so?’ Benny was surprised.

Braxiatel shrugged, but Clarence said: ‘God believes that war is almost inevitable. Your people,’ he nodded at Braxiatel ‘and mine will go to war, revised treaty or not.’

‘But I thought God was now free to develop time travel.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Time travel is really just a side issue now. We always knew that the People would eventually develop the technology, it was just a question of how long it would take. And there are still some pretty major stumbling blocks whether God knows it or not.’

‘So he’s beginning to realize,’ Clarence agreed. ‘B-Aaron found that out from !Cin-ta!x.’

‘So why the war?’ Benny asked.

‘The universe isn’t big enough for the two of them,’ Braxiatel told her. ‘Simple as that. Though I think the main worry now, ironically, is Dellah. If the entities that God needed on Dellah, however unwittingly, escape and their Influence spreads...’ He did not finish.

‘Religious fervour is as good an excuse for a war as any, I suppose,’ Benny said quietly. ‘Though hardly original. Is that what you came to warn us about? The war?’

‘Partly,’ Clarence said. ‘I think that is why God believes I am here.’

‘What then?’

‘God is planning for the war. What plans He has, we don’t know. But from what B-Aaron discovered from !Cin-ta!x, it seems that you are a part of those plans.’

‘Me?’ Benny laughed. ‘War is not, I repeat not, one of my hot buttons.’

‘Both of you.’ Clarence looked from Benny to Braxiatel. ‘Somehow God has discovered, or come to believe, that the two of you are key to the shape of the future. The question is, in what way?’

Braxiatel shook his head, frowning. ‘No,’ he said. ‘The question is, what does God intend to do about it?’

‘Do you know?’ Benny asked.

Clarence shook his head. ‘B-Aaron and I decided we should warn you. He is continuing to make enquiries, to see what he can discover without himself being discovered while he looks.’

Braxiatel smiled thinly. ‘By indirections find directions out.’

‘So, no more clues,’ Benny said. ‘Not yet anyway.’

‘B-Aaron will be in touch when he finds out more.’

‘So what do we do now?’

‘Only one thing we can do,’ Braxiatel said as he drained his cup. ‘Open your present. It might tell us something.’

The box opened easily, hinged near the top. Inside was a small holocube. Benny carefully removed it and held it up to the light. 'A video sequence, I think.' She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. 'Is it hot in here, or is it just me?'

'I can adjust the conditioning,' Braxiatel offered.

Benny shook her head. 'No, no. I'm probably just tired after the journey. I've got a headache coming on.' She smiled thinly. 'Maybe it's the wine.'

'So what's on the cube?'

Benny glanced back at the box, and spotted a small card lying inside. 'Here we are.' She read out the words printed neatly on the card:

*To Professor Bernice Summerfield,
last holder of the Edward Watkinson Chair of Archaeology,
University of St Oscar's on Dellah.
Only surviving visual record of Edward Watkinson
giving a lecture.*

'Most of the records were lost in the last lot of wars,' Braxiatel said. 'There is a biography of Watkinson that is very good, published about thirty years ago. I have a copy somewhere.'

'Forgive me,' Clarence said, 'but who was Edward Watkinson?'

Benny was examining the holocube again. 'He was the greatest archaeologist of the century. Died about eighty years ago. Well,' she conceded, 'disappeared anyway. Never-seen-again job.'

'He was a prolific thinker and writer,' Braxiatel added. 'There is hardly an area of archaeology that he didn't influence in some way. His main contribution was to persuade archaeologists not to be insular, to look at the bigger picture. To see the context in which the subject of the archaeology took place.' He nodded towards Benny. 'Our professor here is an extremely good example of the post-Watkinson archaeologist,' he said with a smile. 'Able to take a more holistic approach, see how the details begin to form an

overall pattern, detect the broader flow of events and lives] rather than get mired in the detail.'

Benny shuffled her feet, as if embarrassed. 'I remember one of his early papers,' she said. 'The one about the old American standard railroad gauge. He used that as an example of how archaeology is relevant to the present, how knowledge of the past helps us to understand how we live today.'

'It was a rebuttal of an article in one of the journals which claimed archaeology was a waste of time and money,' Braxiatel said. 'If I remember correctly, he traced back the reasons for the width of the track being such a strange measurement.'

Benny nodded, her voice betraying her enthusiasm. 'Four feet, eight and a half inches. In old Imperial measurements. Watkinson pointed out that this was the measurement used because that's the way they built the railways in England, and the expatriate English built the American railways.'

'So then he asked, why did they use that measurement in England?' Braxiatel said. 'It was because that was the measurement used for the tramways that preceded the railways, wasn't it?'

Benny nodded. 'The same people built both, using the same equipment. And the standard measurement was already set, since that equipment was used before the trams to build wagons.'

'And the wagons?' Clarence asked.

'The wagons had their wheels spaced to fit the ruts that were already worn into the roads. And those roads were built originally by the Romans. So the ruts were initially caused by Roman Imperial war chariots.'

'Since all the chariots were made in Rome, or to the standard specification,' Braxiatel added, 'they all had the same wheel spacing.'

'Four feet, eight and a half inches,' Benny repeated.

'And how did the Romans arrive at that measurement?' Clarence asked.

‘That was Watkinson’s point really,’ Benny told him. ‘The Americans who travelled on their railroads needed an appreciation of history to know the reason they were built to that standard. Most of them never knew that it was a direct result of the fact that two thousand years earlier, the Romans built their chariots exactly wide enough to fit the back ends of two Ancient Roman horses.’

Braxiatel refused to let either Clarence or Benny help clear away the dinner things. As he busied himself round them, Benny thanked Clarence for coming.

‘I’m grateful,’ she said. ‘Though I don’t really think any of us will play a part in the war if there is one. But thanks for the thought. And it’s good to see you.’ She reached across the table and took the angel’s hand between both hers, held it tight. ‘Now that Dellah is gone, my friends are all I have left. But you know, I think that’s all I need.’

There was a sudden loud meow from the floor beside her chair. Benny looked down and laughed. ‘Yes, Wolsey, I include you as a friend, of course I do.’ She looked up again as Braxiatel returned from the kitchen. ‘And you,’ she said. ‘Though I think you’re wrong.’

‘Oh? What about?’

‘Friends are for ever,’ Benny told him.

Braxiatel smiled back and lifted the holocube from the table in front of Benny. ‘I didn’t know there was any surviving video of Watkinson,’ he said. ‘Are you up to a quick look at the great man, or are you too tired?’

‘I’ll do you a deal,’ Benny said, barely suppressing a yawn. ‘You agree to dig out your biography of Watkinson, and I’ll let you sit up late with me and watch the show.’

TRANSCRIPT OF A LECTURE BY PROFESSOR EDWARD WATHINSON AT THE GOLLOQUIAN UNIVERSITY (EXTRACT)

First of all, I must apologize for the absence of Dr Mikelz. He had, I know, intended to delay his departure until the end of the semester. But that has not been possible. Sadly.

So, to compound that sadness, both for you and myself I suspect, here I am to deliver the penultimate lecture in your study of the techniques and successes of Post-Owenian Review.

But before we get into the boring technicalities and the rather more enlightening case studies, I'd like to take a few minutes to put things in context. This is important. Those of you who also attend my series of lectures on the origins of civilization will know that context provides about eighty per cent of the meaning of any level three or above civilized language such as our own. At the lower levels, that increases to over ninety per cent.

So, context then. It is important that before you know how to apply a given technique or procedure that you appreciate the circumstances into which it will be applied. In short the context. It is from the context that you, or whoever, will decide which technique to use in the first place. Knowing when and why is of primary importance as we shall see from our study of Childer's inadvertent destruction of the antiquities of Gelestion. If he had taken the trouble to explore the context of the society and rituals he was unearthing he might have had the foresight not to use Placreb's Dilute Saline

Procedure to clean up ancient artwork that was designed to be ritually dissolved at the spring tide by seawater. And then we might actually still have the great Gelestion Mural rather

than a few indistinct holo-snaps and a blurred mush of washed-out colour.

But we have no need to look so far back into the history of archaeology, to use a somewhat reflexive term, to find examples of equal weight. We do ourselves, let us not forget, constitute the history of the future in the making. So it may be seen in years to come that Dr Mikelz's decision to abandon his lecture course two-thirds of the way through and go in search of what can only be described generously as a romantic notion was a tremendously brave and insightful decision.

Or not.

I have to confess, having studied some of the background - the context - to his current quest, that I am firmly on the 'or not' side of the fence.

For there is a bigger picture. Just as we need to understand

the local circumstances before we rush into prescribing a technique or procedure to suit it, so we need to appreciate the wider picture before we can evaluate whether a job needs doing at all. Or in the fanciful case of the Oracle of the Lost, whether the job even exists.

So, to take another example, it might be fascinating for Professor Helzinger to speculate on the route taken by the trans-Siberian railway, but without knowledge of the political and social circumstances under which it was constructed he is, to adapt a well-worn archaeological phrase, spitting in the dark. You will recall that back on Earth in the mid-twenty-first century, Helzinger produced a three-volume discussion on the railway's path. He pointed out that it was constructed in a perfectly straight line for almost its entire route, but with a significant kink midway, a huge bend away from the straight then back again. Helzinger's reasoned explanation for this was that there was some area that they wished to avoid, and he speculates on what this might be. Was it of historical importance? Or was it especially dangerous? He spares his readers no detail of the hardship endured by the workers and the problems encountered in constructing the

rest of the railway - tunnelling through mountains and bridging raging rivers, and so on.

After his great work was published, of course, he learnt the truth. And realized only then perhaps that he had also been spitting into the wind. For if he had paid as much attention to the political landscape as he did to the geographical one, he would have discovered how the route of the trans-Siberian railway was actually determined. For those few, I am sure, of you that are unaware of the circumstances, you should know that there was a committee. And you will have no trouble believing me when I tell you that the committee was unable to agree a route for the railway. The autocratic and absolute ruler of all the Russias, the Tsar, who had put himself on this committee became increasingly angry with its deliberations and obfuscations. And in the way that only those who wield absolute power can, he decided on the route for them. He placed a ruler on the map, between the start and the destination and drew a straight line. And he made it clear that this was the route that the committee had now agreed.

And the huge bend along its length that Helzinger tried so hard to explain? This was where the Tsar's finger overlapped the ruler as he drew the line. The fact that the railway follows this kink as closely as the rest of the proposed route tells us more about the way the Tsar was perceived by his officials than any amount of Helzinger's so-called research tells us about the railway.

And now we can make some direct comparisons. Just as you need to know in intimate and intricate detail everything about the process you wish to employ, so it is a good rule in any research to ensure that you base your supposition and induction on a factual basis. Rather than, say, a collection of mismatched and self-contradictory legends handed down by word of mouth and the odd scratchings of playwrights and scholars of fiction. If you want to know why, ask the architect, not the builder. Nor the man across the road who knows someone who heard a story about it. Once.

But enough of background and context. If Dr Mikelz wishes to chase a romantic dream halfway across the galaxy,

if he wishes to drag with him his most promising post-graduate student, that is his decision, made no doubt with an impartial regard for the available evidence. Certainly, to take his young and beautiful wife with him as well on such a fool's errand, if such it be, he must be very sure of his context. Let us face it, as archaeologists we all know how her beauty like our own - yes, even yours, Clayborn — will fade and die quickly enough even without the ravages of dust-swept planetoids and the worry of living day to day from the supplies of an inadequately financed and hurriedly assembled expedition.

But why do I dwell on the matter of Dr Mikelz and his early departure from the academic scene here? Well, partly by way of venting my own frustration at being here in front of you today, of course. And I hope you take equal cathartic pleasure in my words given that you are yourselves, as you will have noticed if you were paying any attention at all, Fluvvers, that you are here in front of me. But partly I raise the point because if there is one thing I want you to take home from this brief encounter of ours today, it is this: that the value of understanding the past is in how it can help us to understand the present and shape the future. You have a duty to that understanding, you have a responsibility to the future when you investigate the past. You must choose your research like your techniques based on context. The context of the present day. In other words your work, however dead and boring it may at times appear, is fundamental to the shaping of the history which, as I mentioned just now, we are ourselves all making even as I speak. Even as Dr Mikelz travels forth into the glorious unknown.

But I shall comment no further on the good Dr Mikelz. If the legends of the Oracle of the Lost teach us anything, after all, it is that the greatest folly is in attempting to predict the future. But then those of you taking the economics option will already be fully aware of this.

COMMUNICATION

'Routine check.'

The guard was surprised. 'Sir?'

'Routine check,' Skutloid repeated. 'Open up.'

Still the guard did not move. He was little more than a boy, impulse blaster clutched nervously in his sweaty hands. Probably a research student sponsored by some cosy off-world corporation. He might even have been doing weapons research, but he obviously had no idea how to handle one. 'I can't, sir. Director Silvera's orders. Nobody is allowed to go In.'

'Good,' Skutloid said. 'Well done. Exactly the answer I required.' He paused, then added, as if an afterthought: 'You have the key?'

'Director Silvera has it, sir.' There was suspicion mingled in with the surprise now as the lad stared up at the three green hulking shapes that filled the corridor. The Comms Suite was at the top of a tower and the single bending corridor from the lift was the only approach. 'I'll just check with the Director that everything's all right, sir.'

'That won't be necessary,' Skutloid said. But the guard's hand was already moving to the call button on his lapel. It never got there.

Drexton caught the boy's hand, clenched it hard in his own clumplike fist as with his other hand he removed the comms unit and dashed it to the ground. The casing cracked open and components spilt out. Then Drexton's hand closed on the boy's throat. The blaster had slipped from his failing grip and clattered to the floor.

'No,' Skutloid rasped. 'Let him go.'

'Sir?'

'They will know where we are soon enough. If they don't already.'

The boy was shaking, shivering with fear. His eyes were wide. 'I - I won't tell,' he spluttered, his voice constricted by Drexton's grip. 'I swear.'

'Yes you will,' Skutloid said quietly. 'Go to the Director. Tell him what has happened. Otherwise, *he* will kill you.' He nodded to Drexton.

Drexton released his hold on the boy's throat and pushed him roughly away. The guard bounced off Garshal and stumbled down the corridor, then fell to his knees.

'There is of course no hurry,' Garshal said, scooping up the discarded blaster. The boy pulled himself back to his feet and set off towards the lift at a staggering run.

The three soldiers turned their attention back to the door. They took up their positions without comment. Garshal was the electronics expert and Skutloid helped him as he cut a hole in the door frame to run a patch. Drexton, the warrior, stood guard behind them, barring the corridor. So far there was no sign of anyone else.

'There is a problem, Commander,' Garshal said as he examined the wiring within the panel.

'What is it?'

'The door can be opened simply enough. But I shall need to disable the servo-mechanisms. We shall be unable to close it again.'

Skutloid considered, his breath loud in the corridor. 'Very well. It is imperative that we send the signal. We shall barricade the doorway as best we can.'

Garshal nodded and set to work on the exposed circuitry.

'Any movement?' Skutloid asked Drexton.

'None, Commander.' He replied without turning his attention from the corridor ahead. 'Perhaps the boy is indeed taking his time.'

Skutloid's dry laugh was an ironic cough. 'Or perhaps they are assembling their best possible force and planning an assault on our position.'

'They have no strategic thinkers,' Drexton retorted. 'No one who can match your battle tactics.'

‘True,’ Skutloid agreed. ‘But we must be pragmatic. There are three of us, with limited armaments and supplies and currently no way of escape. There are perhaps a hundred of them, armed with heavy weapons.’

Drexton still did not turn. ‘Honourable odds then,’ he murmured.

With a grating of its failing mechanism, the door to the Comms Suite slid half-open, then jammed. Skutloid forced his way through the gap without comment and surveyed the room inside.

Following behind his commander, Garshal immediately went to the main communications console and activated it. ‘I shall need the message text and the frequency on which to transmit,’ he said as he worked.

‘We need a barricade,’ Skutloid said quietly as he looked round. There was nothing movable of any bulk. The control units were built directly into the walls. Only the chairs were not integral to the architecture, and they were scarcely bulky or strong enough to fashion a credible barrier.

‘I understand, Commander.’ Drexton was through the gap too. And behind him, down at the end of the corridor, the first tentative attackers were poking their heads round the corner, sighting along their weapons.

‘There is nothing here to use,’ Skutloid said quietly.

‘You are wrong, Commander.’ Drexton was standing full in the doorway, his armour sealed and his blaster raised. ‘I am the barricade. They must get through me.’

‘Ready to transmit.’ Garshal’s voice cut across whatever Skutloid might have been about to say.

‘Very well.’ Skutloid told him the frequency and direction parameters, and then recited the brief message. ‘Keep sending until you get an acknowledgement.’ The Neo-Aretian Commander, the greatest strategist of the age, surveyed his forces with pride. ‘Comrades,’ he said, ‘as always, it is an honour to serve with you.’ His massive fist crashed across his breastplate in a formal salute. Each of the others returned the salute. Then Garshal returned to his task and the shooting started.

A PLEA FOR HELP

The inventory system was comprehensive and straightforward. Everything in Braxiatel's collection was marked with carrier-frequency identification tags. The ident of the tag was listed against the item's entry in the catalogue. The correct tag could then be polled to send a signal on a preset frequency. That signal could be traced back to the item to which the tag was attached.

The net result was that there was no need to keep track of where anything was stored, or to make a note if anything was moved. In effect, if you wanted something you simply asked it to tell you where it was. Nothing could go missing once tagged, and if it was stolen then the thieves would be in for a surprise as it could simply tell the authorities to come and collect it.

Benny had found the biography of Watkinson in the catalogue. As Braxiatel had recalled, it was entitled *Living Archaeology*. It was written by Herve Pottle, who Benny was more familiar with as a noted archaeologist in his own right. She had some distant memory that Pottle had been a mentor of Doctor Follett, her head of department at St Oscar's.

Armed with the catalogue reference number and a tracker, Benny followed a global positioning signal along one of the aisles of one of the warehouses in the vast storage facility. Luckily, the book was actually stored here and not on another world in another sky. It took her just ten minutes to find the right crate. It took her another fifteen to work out how to open it.

She had tried kicking at it, levering the lid off, banging the sides in search of a hidden mechanism, and swearing in five different languages (three of which she understood some of). Eventually she gave up and shouted, 'Open up, damn you,' at the crate.

With a hiss of servos and the opening airtight seal, the side Of the crate swung slowly outward to reveal the tidily packed Interior. The book was on a shelf near the top of the crate. It was a large volume, an old-fashioned printed book rather than an input disk or softcopy. Benny lifted it out with a care born of fascination and reverence. She spent just long enough glancing through to see that there was a wealth of new and interesting detail about Watkinson within. The book's bibliography was itself the size of a small volume, and she knew there was more that could be added since the biography was completed. It did, however, include the St Oscar's University Press anthology of Watkinson's essays *Glory Under the Mud* which had come out over ten years after his death. Benny spent a few more minutes leafing through the heavy book before she told the tracker to retrace her route and guide her back to Braxiatel's living quarters.

She found Braxiatel pacing up and down the drawing room. Wolsey was under the table, watching his progress back and forth. There was no sign of Clarence.

'You're back,' Braxiatel said as soon as Benny was through the door. 'Good.'

'Are we playing state the obvious, or is something up?' he asked.

In answer, he handed her a message flimsy. She read it through quickly. Then she read it through again, more slowly this time.

For Attention of Irving Braxiatel

Situation on Dellah worsening. Occupying defensive position in Communications Suite of Advanced Research Department. Expect hostile aggression soonest. Note that 'defensive' is an exaggeration.

Request extraction if possible. Three to leave.

If not, farewell old friend.

Skutloid

‘You’re going back to Dellah?’ she asked. ‘You must be mad.’

‘He’s a friend. I owe him.’

‘He’s probably already dead,’ Benny said. ‘Or infected with the religious fervour.’

Braxiatel took the message back from her, folded it neatly and put it in his inside jacket pocket. ‘I don’t think so. The Neo-Aretian armour might well protect them from succumbing to the religious fervour themselves. They could be safe. The message was sent seven minutes ago.’

‘Safe from the contagion, maybe.’ Benny looked him in the eyes. ‘But what about the people who already afflicted? We know first-hand how they feel about those they consider to be heretics. We know what they will do.’

Braxiatel nodded. ‘Which is why I have to go. And soon. We can be there in four hours in the ship I have berthed here. Three if we push it. If there is any chance, any chance at all...’

Benny looked away. ‘Like you said, he’s a friend. And friends are for ever, right?’

‘Like you said, I must be mad.’

‘We both must,’ she said quietly. ‘How do we get there?’

FINALE

She was crying now. Soundlessly the tears were welling up in her eyes, rolling down her grimy cheeks. 'I told him to say something at my wedding. To warn me.' She tried to wipe away some of the tears with one hand. With the other she still held the gun. As she remembered...

'I knew you'd be here, you know,' Bernice said.

'I wouldn't miss this for anything.' Irving Braxiatel raised his glass in salute.

'I meant, I knew you'd be by the champagne.'

He laughed. 'And what did you think I meant I wouldn't miss?'

'Touché.'

Braxiatel looked round the crowded room. 'I seem to know a lot of people here.'

'I'm not surprised. I doubt if many of them know you, though.' She smiled.

'Indeed not.' He laughed. 'Indeed not.' He popped the cork of a new bottle and let the stream of bubbles flow down the side and over his hand. 'So now you've married that man over there, do you have any more idea what he's like?'

Benny considered. 'No,' she said eventually, taking the proffered glass. 'But he loves me violently.'

Braxiatel nodded, half smiling. 'I hope you find out soon,' he said quietly. 'There may be questions.'

'There always are.' Benny drained her glass in a gulp. She smiled suddenly and radiantly. 'Nice to see you, and I mean that.' She leant forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Then, as she turned to leave, Braxiatel said: 'Your husband does have one distinct advantage, being married to an archaeologist.'

'What's that?'

‘The older he gets, the more interested in him you’ll be.’

RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

Where once the landscape had been broken up by the low, red buildings of the university, it was now littered with small groups of people huddled together in the long night. Mothers held infants close to them, weary men searched through the rubble for food. They camped round small bonfires, or lay close together in the ruins, or stumbled across the broken landscape. A few of the buildings were intact, a few recognizable. Most were reduced to piles of burning rubble.

Benny was glad it was night-time. Not just so that the people could not see them clearly, but also to save herself the view of what Dellah had become. She could remember well enough the traumatic experience of picking the emaciated and weakened Wolsey from the demolished remains of her own apartment. She could recall seeing pages of an old and valued textbook blowing across the scene, lost for ever.

So she could empathize with Braxiatel as he stood staring in sod silence at the broken facade of what had once been his Theatrology Department building. Its glass frontage was splintered and smashed. The broken remains of a half-happy, half-sad face stared up at them from a puddle. It was not a puddle of water.

They had landed out of sight of the university and walked briskly towards the fires and the smoke. Now they were almost there, within sight of the great black wall that surrounded the Advanced Research Department. To land inside (he wall, they had both agreed, would have been tantamount to putting out a flag with *'Heretics - Kill, kill, kill'* printed on it. They had been equally agreed that this was not the best of possible plans. Especially since between them they had one small hand-blaster, which was currently concealed in a pocket of Braxiatel's cloak.

As they approached the wall, the hoods of their cloaks pulled well over their heads, they could see that the groups of people were more frequent and larger.

'It's as if they're congregating near the Advanced Research Department,' Benny whispered.

'Congregating is a good choice of word,' Braxiatel hissed back. 'I think you're right, they sense there is some serious conversion to be done inside.'

'Each group wants first dibs, eh?'

'More likely they're waiting for an excuse to tear each other apart. Did you see what they were burning on that fire back there?'

Benny took a deep breath. 'No, I didn't,' she said. 'And don't tell me either.'

He didn't. Instead he asked: 'How are you feeling?'

'A bit dizzy just now, otherwise all right. You?'

'It's a bit tiring for me to keep projecting the mental barrier that prevents us from suddenly adopting one or more of the beliefs. But I don't intend to be here long, so I'm not too worried.'

'Good.'

'You?'

Benny shook her head. 'Just concerned that Clarence will give Wolsey something to eat.'

'If his tea's a bit late because Clarence is chatting to B-Aaron, I don't think he'll suffer any long-term trauma.'

They were close to the wall now, shouldering their way through the rows of people standing outside. It was as if the crowds were waiting for something. As they reached the front row, Benny saw that they were right outside the main gates to the Advanced Research Department.

'How do we get in?' she murmured, just loud enough for Braxiatel to hear.

He shrugged, the gesture making his cloak sag over his shoulders. 'One thing at a time. But these people obviously think they'll be getting in soon. Otherwise why wait here like this?'

The place was in uproar. Messages were coming in faster than Silvera could cope with.

‘Another rogue at Block C,’ someone was shouting. ‘That’s three now.’

‘And another two at B,’ someone else called back.

‘I make it about a dozen altogether.’

‘We have to pull out of the Comms attack, sir.’ He barely heard, was barely listening. Then Annja clapped her hand on his shoulder. ‘Sir, the Comms attack. We need the people in the concourse. At the gate.’ She was shaking him now. ‘They will open the gate. We can’t hold them for long.’

He turned to look at her, considered for a moment. ‘Very well,’ he snapped, and turned away. Skutloid could wait. He wasn’t going anywhere. Annja was right, better to deal with the more immediate threat first. ‘Leave a few guards to make sure they don’t try to get away,’ he added, slumping down in his chair. He stared out across the relief map as Annja hurried off to give the orders. The map had not been updated for an hour. Things were moving too fast for that. Things were falling apart.

Garshal had left the main console and joined Skutloid and Drexton. Drexton was adamant that he was not moving and had jammed himself between the half-closed door and the frame. Skutloid was behind him, blaster resting on the soldier’s shoulder so he could steady it as he took carefully aimed shots at any movement down the corridor.

The walls were scarred and blistered from the firefight, but the attackers seemed to be keeping a low profile now. The end of the corridor was littered with the bodies of those who thought they could rush the Comms Suite, or had merely been too hesitant in pulling back out of sight after loosing off a shot.

Most of those shots had been wasted. But some had struck home and Drexton’s armour was smouldering from the beating it had taken. The breastplate was cracked across, steam escaping from the sterile environment inside. The lens

over his left eye was shattered, blood oozing out through the cracks in the plasti-glass. But he stood solid and firm.

'They are backing off,' Garshal hissed, a note of relief evident in his voice. He had been monitoring Silvera's communications. 'There is only a token force left to prevent our escape now.'

'Why?' Skutloid demanded. 'Do they believe they can merely wait for us to starve?'

'No, Commander. They have a severe problem with rogue fanatics. They fear the wall will be breached.'

Skutloid nodded. 'This is to be expected. Without our security measures, the process has become more rapid. The release of authority, of oppression, is like a broken safety valve.' He clapped a hand on Drexton's shoulder. 'Not long now, my friend. The worst is past.'

'Commander.' They could hear from his voice that Drexton was nearly exhausted. It was only a matter of time before his legs buckled under his own weight. Yet still he refused to change places with either of them. He was the warrior in this triad, Skutloid the strategist, Garshal the technician. This was Drexton's job. His life.

Garshal drew his commander aside, spoke quietly so that Drexton could not hear. 'We are not yet safe, Commander. If the wall is breached...'

Skutloid nodded. 'I know. We may simply change one set of attackers for another. Exchange the weak and frightened forces that Silvera throws at us for a hoard of fanatical murderers who have no qualms about storming our position or dying in the process.' He turned back towards the doorway, looked back at his warrior standing firm between them and death. 'Let us hope it does not come to that.'

'Commander - look!' Drexton's sudden rasping shout was an explosion of noise in the small room.

Skutloid was at his shoulder in a second, looking back along the corridor where Drexton was pointing. 'A weapon?' he murmured.

A small white ball was floating towards them, bobbing up and down in an almost comical manner as it made its way

slowly, almost warily, through the air. The sphere would have fitted inside Skutloid's fist with ease.

Drexton raised his blaster, tracking the ball's slow progress. 'Instructions, Commander?'

But before Skutloid could respond, it was the white ball that spoke. Its voice was mannered, cultured. It was also shaking with nervous excitement and fear. 'No, no,' it called out 'Don't shoot, I'm a...' It paused, as if not quite sure what it was. 'A friend,' it decided after a moment. 'I heard your message to Mr Braxiatel. I came to find you.'

'You are from Braxiatel?' Skutloid demanded as the ball neared them.

Drexton's blaster still tracked it. 'It may be a ruse, Commander.'

From behind them, Garshal said: 'It is a porter. From the university staff accommodation. Limited reasoning and response capability. I doubt it could easily be modified to carry an explosive charge of any significance.'

'I know Braxiatel,' the porter squealed. 'My name is Joseph.'

Its voice was choked off into a muffled shriek as Drexton reached up suddenly and grabbed the ball. He handed it to Skutloid, who let it rest on the open palm of his heavy gauntlet.

'Braxiatel had no need of porters,' Skutloid said. 'You lie.' He closed his fist round the ball, squeezing tightly.

From inside, the porter screamed: 'I wasn't Braxiatel's porter, I just said I knew him.'

Skutloid opened his fist again and stared down at the ball. The relief was almost tangible in its voice as it said: 'I was porter to Professor Bernice Summerfield. She was on the ship with Braxiatel. They are on their way here now.'

The crowd seemed to know. Almost as a single creature they surged forward together, pressing against the gates into the Advanced Research Department. Benny had read a paper once that claimed that the mentality and intelligence of a group of people with a single fanatical purpose could be

equated with that of an individual. What that meant was that each of the people in the crowd was operating on a fraction of the intelligence they would bring to bear as an individual. The bigger the crowd, the lower the intelligence and common sense of each person in it. Caught up in the crush, observing without being overwhelmed by the sense of purpose she could feel in the people round her, Benny could believe it was true.

But she did not have long to dwell on the thought as suddenly the gates burst open. Being near the front, she just caught sight of several figures falling away from the gates as they opened, saw the fervour in their eyes and realized that they had opened the gates to the crowd.

'You want the good news?' she all but shouted to Braxiatel as they struggled to stay close together.

'The good news is that we're in,' he shouted back. 'And the bad news?'

'So are about five hundred other people,' she screamed back at him.

Once inside, the crowd broke up into smaller groups as the religious factions sorted themselves out, shouting for converts and believers to join them as they set off through the ARD. As they started their new crusade. As they hunted down the heretics.

A small group of people with handguns stood firm outside the main block. But this was more of an advertisement than a deterrent. Several of the groups of believers homed in on them, screaming and shouting as they approached at a run.

Shots were fired. A number of the believers fell in the charge forward. But the others redoubled their speed and enthusiasm. The gunmen broke ranks, turned and fled. Most of them did not get far. Several made it inside the building, slamming the doors shut against the attackers and their colleagues alike. The others were stranded outside as the fanatics fell on them. Benny looked away quickly. Braxiatel turned her slightly, pointing to a separate building close to the main block. It seemed significant only in that it had a short, stubby tower attached to one end.

‘That’s where we’re heading,’ he said quietly. ‘The Communications Suite is at the top of that tower.’

The main thrust of the attacking fanatics was now the main block. They were using broken pieces of wood, steel girders, anything as battering rams to try to break through the doors. It was clearly only a matter of time before they managed it.

Braxiatel and Benny dashed across the quadrangle to the building with the tower. Nobody seemed to be at all interested in them as they slipped inside and found the main lift, Benny reached for the call button, but Braxiatel stayed her hand.

‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘If they are under siege up there, we should take the stairs.’

‘Good thought,’ Benny agreed. ‘Surprise attack. Well, surprise sneak up and see what’s happening, anyway. Surprise is my middle name, you know,’ she added for good measure.

She was appalled at how out of breath she was when she reached the top of the dimly lit and dusty stairs. Braxiatel by contrast seemed not to have noticed they had been climbing quickly for about five minutes. He cracked open the door at the top and peered through carefully. After a moment he let the door swing shut again.

‘Well?’ Benny demanded.

‘A few men with guns.’ He shrugged. ‘Not as bad as it might be.’

‘So what do we do? Ask them to leave so we can get on with rescuing Skutloid?’

Braxiatel nodded thoughtfully. ‘That’s a good idea. Yes.’ And before Benny could stop him he pushed open the door and stepped through.

Not quite sure why, she followed him, blinking in the light. The men with guns had their backs to the stair door. There were four of them, standing just back from a bend in the corridor, obviously unwilling to round it.

‘Ah, there you are. Good,’ Braxiatel announced in a loud voice. Benny could tell from his stance that he was holding the blaster inside his cloak.

The men turned. One of them frowned, two raised their guns. The other one stepped forward, eyes narrowing, and stared at Braxiatel. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

‘Director Silvera wants you down at the main block,’

Braxiatel said, ignoring the question. ‘They’re under siege, need every good man.’ He paused for long enough for the sounds of shooting, shouting, screaming from outside to make an impression. ‘There’s no time to lose. The fanatics will deal with the traitors up here.’

The men did not look convinced. So Benny added: ‘They’ll deal with us too if they find us up here. Do you want to be trapped between the religious madmen behind you and Skutloid and his bunch ahead?’ She shook her head. ‘Well it’s up to you, but count me out.’

The leader was still staring at Braxiatel. The others had lowered their guns now. ‘Come on,’ one of them said. ‘Let’s not hang around here.’ He set off down the corridor towards the lift. After a brief pause, the other two followed him.

The leader stood still for a moment. Then abruptly he put up his gun and ran after them.

‘We’re right behind you,’ Benny shouted after them. ‘Send the lift back up.’

Braxiatel was already striding down the corridor in the opposite direction. He rounded the bend, his arms outstretched in a friendly gesture. Immediately there was the sound of blaster fire, and he reappeared as he dived for cover. ‘Thanks,’ he shouted loudly down the corridor. More gingerly this time, he peeped round the corner. There was silence.

Benny joined him and together they made their way down to the Communications Suite, stepping over bodies as they went. Braxiatel paused by one of the corpses, pulling a small electronic device from round the man’s neck. He examined it for a few seconds, then dropped it into his pocket. ‘Later,’ he murmured.

Benny could see one of the Neo-Aretians standing in the doorway at the end of the corridor, as if the door had slid shut on him. He was holding a heavy blaster and looked so exhausted that Benny feared he might drop it. His armour was fractured, the whole of the front plates blistered and scarred from impulse fire. One of his eyes was an empty socket that was oozing dark liquid. As they approached, he seemed to jerk into life, standing more erect, stepping aside slowly from the doorway and allowing another figure to emerge into the corridor. It was Skutloid.

Behind Skutloid was another of the massive armoured creatures. The three of them stood at the end of the corridor waiting in silence as they approached. When they were close, Skutloid strode up to Braxiatel and embraced him so hard that Braxiatel winced.

‘My friend,’ the Commander hissed. ‘You came. I knew you would.’

ESCAPE AND DEATH

Benny was slightly embarrassed that she had to be reminded that she had met Garshal and Drexton before. But the circumstances were such now that a little embarrassment was a small thing, easily forgotten. The excuse that one Neo-Aretian looked very much like another was not one she felt inclined to play.

Drexton was too injured to manage the stairs, so they took the lift. Skutloid and Garshal supported him on either side as they emerged on the ground floor. The entrance foyer seemed deserted.

‘We might be lucky,’ Braxiatel said quietly. ‘If everyone’s busy in the main block we may be able to slip out of the Research Department unnoticed and get back to the ship.’

‘Who are you kidding?’ Benny murmured as they pushed open the doors.

Their luck held for the first few minutes. In fact, they were almost at the main gates before there was a shout from somewhere behind them. They had tried to keep to the shadows, but the Neo-Aretians made distinctive silhouette whenever they had to break cover. And speed was difficult given Drexton’s weakened condition.

‘Heretics!’

‘Come on,’ urged Braxiatel, pulling out his gun.

‘Unbelievers! Death to those who deny the one True Faith.’

‘Oh yeah, which “one true faith” is that?’ Benny shouted back half-heartedly as they broke into a staggering run towards the gates. A shot whined past her ear. ‘Sorry I asked,’ she muttered.

She thought at first that Drexton was struggling to run faster. So far the best he had been able to muster was a stumbling jog. But as Garshal and Skutloid fought to restrain him, she realized he was trying to break free of their grip.

Even then she did not immediately realize why. He shook them loose at the gates, swinging round to face the dozen or so fanatics who were running towards them.

‘Go, Commander,’ he hissed. ‘I am dead already.’ Then he loosed off a long blast from his weapon.

The fanatics dived for shelter. Three of them were too slow, caught full in the blast, writhing a moment before shing to the ground.

‘You can’t stay here,’ Benny said, her voice breaking slightly. ‘They’ll kill you.’

‘Better they kill me than all of us,’ Drexton croaked back. ‘My outer armour is fractured, the sterile shell is breached. It is only a matter of time before my wounds are infected by the bacteria in this alien atmosphere. Already my repair systems and healing processes are failing.’ He leant down so that his bloodied face was almost level with Benny’s. ‘Go,’ he hissed again. ‘Go while you still have a chance.’

‘We were wrong to ask you to return,’ Skutloid said quietly. ‘We shall all face our deaths here together. An honourable end for the three of us.’

‘No, Commander,’ Drexton said weakly. ‘There is no honour in dying needlessly. I shall protect the rear, cover your escape.’ To punctuate his words he let loose another burst of fire at the fanatics who were advancing cautiously again, keeping to areas of cover. They had been joined by others who had heard the shooting. More were visible massing in the dark distance.

They all ducked behind the wall at the sound of gunfire. There were shouts and cries too. Some of the fanatics were waving firebrands as they cautiously advanced.

‘If you don’t come with us,’ Braxiatel said, ‘then this will really have been for nothing.’ He held out his hand.

Skutloid hesitated a moment longer, then bowed his head. ‘Very well.’ When he looked up, he reached out and took the coin that Braxiatel was holding out to him. ‘Thank you.’

‘For the Journeyman,’ Braxiatel said quietly. Then he led Benny away.

Behind them, Garshal clapped his comrade on the shoulder and said something that Benny did not hear. Then Skutloid also embraced his fellow. All around them was the sound of shouting, of gunfire. A firebrand flew through the air landed close to Skutloid's feet. He stamped it out contemptuously as he handed Drexton the coin. Their hands were clasped together for a second as Drexton took it, then Skutloid turned and strode away.

Benny watched a moment longer. Drexton was standing with his legs braced slightly apart, blasting continuously into the fanatics as they charged forward waving blazing torches, firing guns, shouting and screaming. And out of the burning firelight, Skutloid strode towards them, the flickering from the torches illuminating the grim determination on his face.

Behind them they could hear the sounds of the battle - blaster fire, crude percussion weapons, shrieks of rage and pain. But before the sounds faded too far into the distance, they stopped. There was silence for a moment, then a shout of triumph that grew into a roar of victory.

They had a good head start, thanks to Drexton. The people outside the ARD seemed less inclined to hinder their progress, more concerned with keeping warm and alive. They were within sight of Braxiatel's ship before they encountered more trouble.

The gang came at them silently out of the night. The first clue they had that they were in trouble was the waving torchlight as the fanatics emerged from behind the ship and raced towards them across the broken landscape. As they approached, as they emerged from the darkness, a shout went up.

'Heretics! Unbelievers! Kill them all!'

'Protect the humans,' Skutloid roared at Garshal, who immediately stepped in front of Benny and raised his blaster.

'I'll ignore the insult under the circumstances,' Braxiatel muttered, aiming his own gun.

But his view was blocked by Skutloid. He was striding towards the attackers, loosing off blast after blast. The first wave of attackers ran straight into the wave of energy. It

caught them, lifted them up, hurled them back at their fellows. But there were more people coming. Skutloid kept walking, kept firing, blasting a path through towards the ship. The intensity of the blasts was visibly reduced as the power drained. Before long, the energy was knocking the attackers off their feet, but they were getting up again almost immediately. A few swayed groggily on their feet, but most came back at the Commander, hurling themselves into the attack. They did not seem to have guns, they hit out with firebrands, smashed broken staves, pieces of bent metal, anything at Skutloid as he struck out at them.

Garshal and Braxiatel were both firing into the crowd, picking off the people on the edge of the unequal fight. But without getting closer they could do little more.

‘Go on,’ Braxiatel urged.

‘I must protect you,’ Garshal hissed back, the emotion evident in his voice.

‘We can get to the ship,’ Benny said. ‘We’ve got a gun. You help him.’

He needed no further urging. Benny ran, Braxiatel close on her heels, turning as he ran and firing at anyone who tried to follow them. They skirted round the crowd of attackers, glimpsed Skutloid standing upright in the centre of the melee, thrashing out with his massive fists, knocking people aside as he struggled onward. Braxiatel paused for a moment, gun in hand. Then he seemed to realize that he could do little to help, and he followed Benny.

She did not turn back until she was at the ship. Nobody had tried to stop them. With Garshal’s intervention, they were all caught up in the fight. Benny looked back as Braxiatel unlocked the main hatch. She was in time to see Garshal blast down a few more fanatics. Most had already fled, A few were still wrestling with Skutloid who was on his knees now, his movements obviously weak as he tried to ward off their blows. Garshal dragged two of the attackers away, hurling them aside. He grabbed another round the neck, twisting, letting the limp body drop to the ground.

Then he dragged his commander to his feet and together they stumbled through the darkness towards the ship.

Braxiatel loosed off several random blasts to keep people away. Then he and Benny both helped Garshal drag Skutloid across the threshold. His armour was dented in several places, a crack running clear across the breastplate. His eye-lenses were misted over and fluid was oozing from ragged cut down the side of his face. As he staggered forward, Benny could see that the back of his helmet was stoved in, a mass of armour plating, blood and tissue matted together.

Skutloid held Braxiatel's forearm tight for a moment. 'I think, my friend,' he said, his voice cracking with the effort 'that I shall shortly be requiring another coin from you.'

'So, you still do the old Martian business with the coins,' Benny said.

She was alone with Garshal. The Neo-Aretian was battered but, apart from some bruising, had survived without serious injury. His commander was not so lucky. Braxiatel was hooking him up to a life support system in the ship's small sickbay. But they all knew that even with a fully equipped med-lab his injuries were beyond repair.

Garshal was pacing slowly up and down the main deck 'Superstition,' he said. 'An ancient tradition that is preserved as one of the trappings of honour.'

'I thought your people were big on honour.'

Garshal stopped and turned to face her. 'There is little honour in dying alone in the dark,' he said bitterly.

'He wasn't alone,' Benny said. 'You did all you could And he's not dead yet, you know.'

'He has asked for a coin,' Garshal said. 'The coin is to pay the Journeyman for the trip to Kinova. To heaven, you would say.'

'And when you die, you have to have a coin, to ensure you get to heaven,' Benny said. She was well aware of the tradition.

Garshal nodded. 'It is placed in the mouth.' He turned away. 'As I say, it is a useless superstition.'

Before Benny could comment further, the door opened and Braxiatel came in. 'He's asking for you,' he said. 'For both of you.'

'How is he?'

Garshal pushed past them through the doorway. 'He is dying,' he said. Then he was gone.

Benny looked at Braxiatel.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, I'm afraid he is.'

It was hard to equate the figure lying on the bed with the Warrior who an hour earlier had walked calmly and proudly into his final battle. Tubes and wires ran from equipment to the body, disappearing inside the broken armour. A heart monitor bleeped irregularly to itself while a ventilator kept up a steady stentorian breathing.

Skutloid's head turned slightly as Benny approached, Garshal was standing the other side of the bed, holding his commander's hand tightly in both his own.

'I - I have something for you,' Skutloid hissed, every word an obvious effort. He lifted his arm slightly, pulling his hand from a small compartment built into his armour. The hand was bunched into a fist and slowly the fingers uncurled.

Benny watched as Skutloid's hand lifted, a small white ball nestling inside his fingers. 'Joseph?' she said in a mixture of disbelief and surprise.

'Your porter,' Skutloid rasped. 'He came to us for rescue. That at least I have achieved.'

Joseph lifted uncertainly from Skutloid's palm and floated upward a few feet. 'It was dark in there,' he complained in a thin voice.

'It's good to see you, Joseph,' Benny said. She took a deep breath. 'Look, we're busy right now. Can you find somewhere to go for a few minutes? Somewhere else.'

The ball bobbed up and down, as if taking in the situation. Then it headed for the door. 'Of course,' it said, surprisingly quietly. 'I understand.' It paused in the doorway, close to Braxiatel who was watching it keenly. 'Thank you, Commander,' Joseph said. Then he was gone.

'You have achieved a lot,' Braxiatel said as he joined Benny beside the bed. 'We all owe our lives to you.'

'But I risked your lives in asking you to come back.'

Skutloid's head slumped backward. 'A coward's plea.'

'No,' Benny said. 'No. That's what friends are for. You saved Garshal. You would have saved Drexton, but he died with honour to ensure the rest of us escaped.'

'Perhaps.' The word was a painful croak. 'Perhaps.'

'Not perhaps. Definitely,' she insisted.

'I owe you my life several times over, my friend,' Braxiatel said. 'There is no dishonour in knowing the odd are against you and sending for help. For reinforcements.'

'And nobody forced us to come,' Benny said. 'We came because we wanted to, knowing the risk.'

'Think what you have achieved, Commander,' Garshal said quietly. 'Think of the honour, the glory, the achievement of your life. Do not dwell on these last few days of chaos.' He was breathing heavily, and Benny realized he was crying. 'I too owe you my life many times.'

'At least I have died in battle.' Skutloid's voice was barely audible now. The heartbeat was becoming more erratic, less frequent. The ventilator was an uneven, ragged sound as his breathing failed and it tried to compensate. 'An honourable death. That at least.'

'Oh yes.' Braxiatel held a coin in his hand. 'There is no greater honour than giving your life to save your friends.'

Skutloid stirred slightly, his head lifting again a fraction. 'From you, my friends,' he breathed, 'my friends who came back for us, from you that is indeed a worthy epitaph.' Then his head slumped back into the pillow. The ventilator ground to a halt. The heart monitor was a steady, flat, empty tone.

Braxiatel reached out, the coin held between his fingers. But Garshal took it from him. He carefully pushed it between his commander's thin lips, then pushed the mouth closed.

Braxiatel nodded, as if in agreement or approval. Then he turned and strode from the room.

'I thought you didn't believe in that,' Benny said softly as she walked with Garshal towards the door.

'It is not what I believe that is important,' he said, his voice strained. 'It is what he believed.'

It was only when she saw Garshal's tears, as he turned to leave, that Benny realized that she too was crying.

A VISITOR

The journey back to the storage facility was sombre but mercifully short. Garshal sat alone on the flight deck, lost in his thoughts and memories. Benny sat with him for a while, sharing the utter silence. Joseph hovered quietly at Mir back of the room, seemingly as subdued as everyone else by events. After a while, the despondent atmosphere became too much for Benny and she went in search of Braxiatel.

She found him in a tiny workshop area in the engineering section of the small ship. He was tinkering with a small electronic device. When she looked closely, Benny recognized it.

‘That’s the thing you took from the body outside the Communications Suite, isn’t it?’

‘Mmmm.’ He did not look up. He was staring at an exposed part of the component through a jeweller’s eyeglass.

‘Interesting?’

He did not answer immediately, but prised off another section of the small device’s shell with his thumbnail. He glanced inside, grunted and shook his head in apparent annoyance. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘Not in the least.’

‘What does it do?’

Braxiatel sighed, set down the device and his eyeglass and looked up at Benny. ‘As far as I can tell,’ he said, ‘it does nothing. Nothing at all.’

Benny thought about this. ‘So what is it, then?’

‘According to Garshal it’s an alpha-wave suppressor.’

‘Oh.’ Benny nodded, completely mystified.

‘According to its inventor, Director Silvera of the Advanced Research Department - probably the late Director Silvera by now - it protects anyone in contact with it from being overwhelmed by religious belief and zest.’

‘Sounds useful.’ Benny picked up the small device and weighed it in her hand. ‘It’s very light,’ she said.

Braxiatel took it from her, opened it up and tipped out the innards. There was a simple printed circuit board and a few wires. ‘It’s light,’ he said, ‘because there’s practically nothing inside it. It does nothing, as I said.’

‘But it worked, presumably.’

‘Oh yes, it worked. But I think it worked because Silvera had people believe that it worked, rather than because it actually did anything itself. Something else to believe in.’

Benny nodded. ‘You mean it protected people by directing their faith and fervour into believing it protected them.’

‘Something of the sort. The components are far too simple for it to do anything of any value.’ He tossed the device down on the workbench. ‘By the way,’ he said suddenly ‘where’s Joseph?’

‘Bobbing about on the flight deck. Probably tidying things up. Garshal’s there too.’

Braxiatel nodded. ‘Perhaps we should join them. We’ll be landing soon. I need to slow us down a bit before we enter monitored space. Otherwise we’ll attract some attention.’ He smiled. ‘We’re not supposed to be able to travel this fast, you know.’

As Benny expected, Braxiatel had a limo waiting for them at the spaceport. He had also arranged for Skutloid’s body to be removed and stored for his funeral. There were distant relatives, friends and former comrades-in-arms to contact, arrangements to be made. It would take a while.

As Benny also expected, Clarence was waiting for them in Braxiatel’s apartment in the warehouse. What Benny had not expected to find, feet up on the table, nursing a large drink was her ex-husband.

Braxiatel took Garshal off to find him a hotel. Clarence was also tactful enough to leave Benny and Jason alone together to get through the usual barbed unpleasantries. It didn't take long.

So what happened to your latest bimbo?' Benny asked at last. 'The telepath, what was her name? We could have used her a few hours ago.'

'Her name is Mira,' Jason said. 'And she was a business colleague. That business is over and she's seeking other employment.'

'Is that what you call it? Well, it's refreshingly honest I suppose.' Benny poured herself a glass of wine from a bottle on the sideboard. She didn't offer to refill Jason's empty glass.

Annoyingly, he did not seem to mind this. Wolsey was lying on the next chair, sleeping, and Jason dangled a frayed thread from his cuff in front of the cat, letting it tickle his nose. The cat slept through it for a few moments. But then, suddenly, it was awake. It gave an angry snarl, pawing at the thread and hissing at Jason through bared teeth. Then it leapt from the chair and slunk off. Jason laughed.

'So how did you find me?' Benny asked. 'And what do you want? Money?'

'Please.' He seemed scandalized at the thought. 'Anyway,' he added, 'I doubt you have any. You don't usually. Besides, I came to offer you something.'

Benny snorted. 'Something contagious, no doubt.'

'Oh well.' He swung his heavy booted feet off the table and stood up. 'If you're not interested, I dare say I can sell the information rather than just give it to you.'

'Wait, what information?'

'Oh yes,' he went on, 'there are probably any number of noted archaeologists who'll pay through the eye teeth...'

'Pay for what? What have you stolen now?'

He grimaced. 'I haven't stolen anything.' Then his grimace blurred into a grin. 'I've found something.'

'Show me.'

'It isn't the sort of thing you carry about.'

‘Valuable?’

‘Big. And, yes, valuable as well, I would say. But since you’re obviously not interested, and no doubt have better things to do with your time, I’ll look elsewhere for help excavating it.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ Benny’s voice was laced with sarcasm, ‘you’ve found the Fountain of Forever, haven’t you.’

He stared at her, his eyes hard. ‘Get real,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I’m sorry I’ve wasted your time.’

Benny handed him her drink and poured herself another. ‘Sit down,’ she said. ‘And tell me what the hell you’re talking about.’

Jason sipped at the wine. ‘OK. It was by chance,’ he said as he sat down again. ‘I came across some old papers in a library. They weren’t catalogued.’

‘I didn’t think you knew what a library was.’ She frowned at him, and asked seriously: ‘Have you started dating librarians?’

He glared at her.

‘Sorry. Go on.’

‘Thank you. I was actually trying to find out who owns a holding company that has a stake in another company I was dealing with. What I found instead was an old deed of ownership for a small planet. There’s no computer record, probably lost in the last war. Or earlier.’ He pulled a crumpled sheaf of papers from his jacket pocket and unfolded them on the dining table. ‘Look, here.’

Benny looked. The paper was a copy of the document Jason had found. The original was obviously old and faded. It looked like a standard land registration deed, several hundred years old judging by the archaic language. Jason was pointing to a sentence he had underlined on the copy:

Also, all mineral, mining, excavation and building rights (provided the usual permissions, planning consents and agreements are obtained) are granted to the planetoid Cappa Nine Seven, also known locally as Delfestes.

Benny read it three times. 'I guess you know that Delfestes is sometimes a corruption of Delfus-Orestes. But if you think you've actually found Delfus-Orestes from this,' she said quietly, 'then I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.'

Jason smiled. 'You're too late, I already know. When I went to the star charts to find Cappa Nine Seven...'

'You discovered that all the old naming conventions have been superseded by new ones.'

Jason nodded. 'About a hundred and fifty years ago. Yes.'

'Still,' Benny looked over the paper again, 'it's interesting. Should be properly catalogued. I'm surprised nobody else has found it. They'd be selling copies as a curiosity if nothing else.'

Jason said nothing. He leant back in the chair, rocking it gently on its back legs. His hands were laced behind his head as he watched her.

'What?' Benny asked. 'There's more?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'I thought it was odd nobody else had found this,' he said. 'And that it was stuffed in with the company registration papers. So I checked who else had asked for this set of papers.'

'And?'

'And the last time they were requested was eighty years ago. Give or take. By a guy I'd never heard of, though I think you may have.'

Benny sat down next to him, looked him in the eye. 'All right,' she said. 'Who?'

'Dr Oleg Mikelz.'

Benny continued to stare at Jason. 'Mikelz,' she said quietly. 'But he -'

'Is supposed to have found Delfus-Orestes. To have discovered the Oracle of the Lost. I know.'

Benny picked up the paper, read through it again. 'And this could be part of the trail he followed,' she said. 'Or it could be a dead end he pursued.' She glanced back at Jason, then put down the paper. 'You're smiling in that particularly smug and annoying way that means you're one step ahead.'

He nodded. 'I checked up on Mikelz, found out who he was. So I asked to see a list of the other papers and documents he had checked out at the same time.'

Benny nodded. 'Smart.'

'Thanks.' He pulled another sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. 'This was the only one that seemed of Interest.'

Benny almost snatched it from him. It was a hand-written page from a spaceship's log book. The title at the top of the sheet identified it as the *Kindred Spirit*, a freighter. It was a simple daily log, with short, terse entries. Jason leant over and tapped his finger on one of the entries:

Rounded waypoint Cappa Nine Seven. All systems normal. On schedule.

The words Cappa Nine Seven had been circled, and in the margin was scrawled in another hand:

Now KS-159.

'Oh my Goddess,' Benny said quietly. 'KS-159, wherever that might be, is Cappa Nine Seven. And Cappa Nine Seven is Delfus-Orestes.' She looked at Jason, who was smiling back at her. 'Could be Delfus-Orestes,' she added. 'It could be. If we can find it.'

'Oh, we can find it,' he said, his smile cracking into a full grin. 'And it is.'

Benny was smiling too. 'How can you be so sure?' she said, though she had already guessed.

'Because I've been there and looked.'

JASON'S STORY

I knew the legends, of course. I'd reread some of the children's stories on the way. And I thought I knew from my brief research of Mikelz the sort of thing to expect.

'But it didn't prepare me for the reality. Nothing like.

'I don't know what I expected to find. I remember you telling me that ancient civilizations don't leave their treasures - weapons, gold, relics, whatever - just lying around for people to discover. So I suppose I was really expecting that there would be nothing there. Otherwise, if I'd had any inkling of what I should actually find, I would have come for you first.

'It looked just like any other piece of space rock. A small planetoid captured in the gravity field of a distant sun and spectacularly close to a ringed planet. I was surprised it was so small, even though I knew from what I'd read that the Delfans actually inhabited Delfus-Clytaemnestra, and only visited this place when they wanted to consult their oracle. If It was this place.

'And that seemed to be about it. There was dust and sand everywhere. Cliffs, chasms, dunes. That's all. I had an all-terrain rover, one of those six by six jobs with independent suspension, so it was fun bombing about in that, thinking I might crest a sand dune and find the Oracle sitting in the next valley, waiting to be discovered just like you said couldn't happen. I had to be careful though. The gravity was pretty high for the planet's size, so I didn't want to go crashing over a cliff. You don't need an oracle to tell you that's a Bad Move, with capital letters.

'I suppose there was a moment of revelation, but I don't recall it. One minute I was driving along looking at the spectacularly boring scenery. The next, I was standing on a stretch of sand knowing that it had been excavated years

before. You can tell, you can see that there's something buried there, from the way the ground dips like it's subsided or something. You couldn't tell what, of course. Anyway, I marked it and set off back to the ship. I had a couple of remote earth-movers which I thought could uncover a bit of whatever it was. Just enough to prove there was nothing really there before I gave up and went home. But on the way, there was this cave.

The whole area is rather odd. It's like something just threw the sand and earth over the temple. Oh yes, it's the Temple of the Lost all right. I uncovered enough to see that. The sand is just lying there, not impacted so it's dead easy to clear away. You can probably uncover the whole thing in a couple of days. We'll see.

'But anyway, this cave. I stopped and had a look. And it looked like a hole stretching downward. As I went inside, I could see that the cave was shored up further along. It was a tunnel. And it ran down into the mound that I thought might - might just - be the temple.

'Did I go along it? You bet I did. Are bears Catholic? The bottom of the tunnel levelled out and it ended in a sort of hole. And through the hole, oh you wouldn't believe it.

The chamber is huge, like a cavern hollowed out of the sand. The roof of the temple looks pretty intact at that point above it. But I wasn't looking at the roof. I sort of fell in and stumbled about in amazement and surprise. There was a stone altar thing, like a control console I suppose, but carved rather than made from components, and I fell against it.

'I don't know if I hurt myself. I don't remember. All I recall is seeing the Oracle for the first time. That incredible statue. She's so much more impressive, more beautiful, more - everything - than you expect, than the legends and stories say. You just have to see her for yourself. You really do.'

* * *

'Just try to stop me,' said Benny.

Braxiatel and Clarence were back now. They had listened with Benny in amazement and increasing excitement as Jason told them his story. Now it seemed like everyone was

talking at once, planning, making comments, wondering what help they would need.

‘Who has the land rights?’ Braxiatel wanted to know. ‘We need to make sure we can’t be accused of trespass or there could be problems.’

‘We’ll need a team of proper archaeologists. Two at least,’ Benny was saying. ‘Hey, this might be just the place you’re looking for to set up shop.’

‘I just can’t wait to show you. To show you all,’ Jason told them.

Clarence just sat and smiled, watching the enthusiasm grow and enjoying the company of friends.

And so it went on late into the evening.

Benny was still wide awake with the excitement and anticipation as she climbed into bed. On the cabinet beside her, where she had carelessly left it when she packed to leave for Dellah, lay the book *Living Archaeology*. She picked it up, turned straight to the index and looked for references to Oleg Mikelz. He had, after all, been a friend and colleague of Watkinson from what she recalled. Sure enough, there were several entries. Her attention was caught by: *Mikelz’s message to Watkinson from the Delfus-Orestes expedition (extract)*, and she thumbed through to the page.

MIHELZ'S MESSAGE TO WATHINSON FROM THE DELFUS-ORESTES EXPEDITION (EXTRACT)

...I had managed, by good fortune, to acquire a cargo hopper from a space-port operator that was in the process of closing down its operations. The hopper was rather antiquated, I am sorry to have to admit, and so our journey was hardly *port out, starboard home*. But it served us well in terms both of speed and its capacity for carrying our equipment and supplies.

In fact, we made good time to the planetoid that I believed - indeed, that I knew - to be Delfus-Orestes. As it loomed large in the forward screen, there was a barely suppressed feeling of excitement among us. Louisa clutched my arm, her face radiant. Gregor was almost hopping from one foot to the other, and I myself found it increasingly difficult to keep my concentration on the controls of the craft.

You will, of course, see for yourself one day, but I cannot resist the urge to try to explain to you what we saw. I say 'try' as I doubt whether words, especially those of myself, can encompass the beauty of the sight or the heights of emotion we reached as we neared our destination and gazed down at the fractured surface far below.

I had more of an idea of what to expect than did my companions. But even so, I was struck almost dumb by the sight as we approached. The planetoid is not large, even for a planetoid, and it can hardly be described as beautiful or even unusual in terms of its geophysiology. It is, to be short, a ball of red-brown sand floating in space. But as you are so fond of telling us, old friend, context is everything. So let me put it in its place, let me describe the setting as a jeweller would

describe the secondary stones and workmanship that offset the main piece.

As we neared our destination, Delfus-Orestes seemed almost to appear out of the centre of the planet behind it. I prefer not to name the planet in open, albeit encrypted, communication for obvious reasons. Suffice to say that the huge multi-coloured rings that arc around it seemed to cut down across our destination, as if carving their way into the sand itself. Either side, barely visible against the black velvet expanses of space, two other, more distant, more dull planets were set in their courses. And as we came closer, so Delfus-Orestes seemed to grow, the planet behind hardly changing its own size. Our destination seemed to swell towards us, as if in greeting, as if coming to meet us. Our destiny beckoned.

I must confess that as we neared what we hoped and expected to be our final destination, I for one felt a flutter of apprehension. What if I were wrong? What if, after all, this were not the place I had sought for so long? I knew - *knew* - that it was, but still there was a shade of doubt in my mind. I would hazard that there is always doubt in our universe, but that is perhaps a topic for another occasion.

But what doubts I and perhaps my companions had were soon dispelled. For as we passed over the horizon of the planetoid, as we crested low over the massive cliffs and canyons that cracked its surface, we could see our ultimate destination. Atop a cliff, the planet and her spectacular rings visible behind it like a setting sun, we all saw the top-most lintel of the temple and the hint of several broken pillars jutting out of the sand.

And this is why nobody but us for a thousand years or more has looked upon the Temple of the Oracle. Delfus-Orestes has an atmosphere, breathable if slightly thin. And where there is an atmosphere, a breeze will follow. There is a gentle, almost balmy breath in the movement of the air. Barely noticeable from moment to moment as we stood on the burning surface of the world, but over the millennia it is sufficient to move the sands, to blow them across the temple

floor, into the Great Hall of the Oracle until it is filled. In short, to all but bury the huge edifice. A scant millennium more, and the Temple of the Oracle would have been invisible to the naked eye.

I will not bore you with the details of how we set up camp and unpacked our supplies and the heavy equipment. I know that you are more familiar than I with such procedures. Nor will I indulge my ego by detailing the extensive surveying and geophysical examination we embarked upon before I would countenance the removal of a single mote of dust from the site. Such things are the usual, the norm. And there is nothing unusual, let me tell you, about what we have uncovered.

And, yes, I mean literally uncovered. For after the survey work, we moved in the sand-shifters and set to work with a renewed passion. We could see our goal, could touch the stonework that was thrust up out of the sand at us as if a challenge.

But you know as well as I, perhaps better, how ill-equipped our expedition was in terms both of manpower and equipment. I do not begrudge that any more than I hold you responsible for our lack of funding. Your comments were well made and reasonable, I have to admit. But in retrospect, I am glad of it.

Yes, glad. To think that someone else, someone other than ourselves, us three, would see our work, might set eyes upon this feast of antiquity before we have completed our own banquet of wonder... I could not suffer such a thing. No, I must catalogue and document everything, absolutely everything myself before anyone else is permitted access. Even you, my friend.

Indeed, I run ahead of myself now, but suffice it to say that we have dug into the Oracle chamber itself. Yes! We have uncovered the greatest marvel of the ancient age. Most of the temple remains under sand and rock, but the chamber we have tunnelled into and cleared. Oh, my friend - what wonders!

But, and I am almost loath to admit it, my passion is such that I have forbidden even Gregor, even my wife Louisa - darling Louisa - to enter the chamber until my work is complete. They are keen to help, of course. Desperate to help. I think they believe I am overzealous in my strict prohibition. But be that as it may, I cannot yet bring myself to share the burden of discovery with them. So they spend their time cataloguing and recording the other discoveries, excavating the less important areas of the site. I thank the stars that they are good friends and they seem to enjoy each other's company, for I am rarely with them, my work takes so much time and diligence. I miss my darling Louisa, of course, but I know that Gregor takes good care of her. And it is not for long. Not now.

But I have not told you of the new object of my affections (I exaggerate for effect, of course!). I have not told you of the Oracle.

As I mentioned, we tunnelled through to the Oracle chamber, believing it to be at the eastern end of the temple (as legend and Delfan lore have it). Gregor was on the shifter when it broke through, but being the good friend that he is and understanding the depth of my enthusiasm for this quest, he came at once to get me before clearing away the debris. When there was a sufficient gap through which to see, I put my eye to the hole. The infra-red imagers are a truly remarkable aid for such occasions, and I was able to see clearly into the chamber. For, luckily, a section of the roof survives and the shifting sands of time had blown across the floor and buried the roof but had not filled the chamber. So it was that I was able to stare through the gloom and the dust and see the Oracle.

'Can you see her?' Gregor asked, his voice husky with both the dry dust and with the emotion of the moment.

'Oh yes,' I sighed, scarcely daring to draw breath. 'And she is wonderful.'

I knew at once that I - only I - must enter the chamber. At least for the while. So I bid Gregor return to the base and wait there with Louisa. He was reluctant, of course. You may

imagine his enthusiasm for joining me, but I was adamant. And once he was gone, back down the tunnel towards the tiny roundel of daylight that was its beginning, I cleared away more of the sand and debris and I entered the inner sanctum - the Oracle chamber.

I am not sure quite what I expected, the legends and stories vary to such a degree. But the Oracle was far more beautiful than I imagined even in my most extreme dreams. She is, as the legends say, a huge golden statue in the shape of a woman seated upon a throne. But that is not the half of it. To convey the size and rare beauty of the thing, to give an impression of one thousandth part of her beauty, of the detail and workmanship, of the sense of wonder you must experience in her presence is beyond me. Is, I would hazard, beyond anyone.

How long I stood there, my mouth open in amazement, I do not know. But by the time I dared approach closer, I felt I knew her every detail - every curve of the uplifted arm, every carved extravagance of the throne on which she sat, every fold of her dress, every curve of her body.

And at that moment I knew that I must share this beauty j with Louisa. And of course with Gregor. But that was before the Oracle spoke.

Yes, my friend, *spoke*. While we have had our differences about the validity and veracity of the sources I consulted during my quest, I must confess that I have always believed - like you - that the Oracle's mystic abilities were a fantasy borne of religious fervour. Not so.

I do not mean to tell you, however, that I sat and held a conversation with the Oracle of the Lost. Not that first time. Indeed, as the legends say, the Oracle's power of speech seems limited to her answering of specific questions. And again as the legends have it, her answers are far from the clearest.

As I approached, held out my hand in awe, I said out loud: 'Can this really be the Oracle of the Lost?'

When the Oracle answered, her voice was like music, harmonic and soft. Her eyes seemed to glow into life even as

I spoke, and her head shifted slightly as if she were turning to regard me. The long golden hair shook slightly free, strands falling over her shoulder as she turned. But as I have intimated, her answer was not straightforward, was not clear or expected.

‘Can this really be Oleg Mikelz,’ she said, ‘destroyer of the Oracle?’

For a while I was silent, dumbstruck. It took me a time to understand first that she had moved and spoken to me, and then that she had addressed me by name. How could she know my name? What she had actually said to me did not permeate my understanding until later. And then I assumed I had misheard.

‘You mean, discoverer of the Oracle, do you not?’ I said, my voice trembling with the emotion of the moment.

‘That too,’ she admitted, with a slight incline of her perfect head. ‘I have slept here alone for millennia, and now you awaken me with a question, just as the Delfans of old had questions they wished resolved.’

‘And did you always answer them?’ I asked, growing bolder.

‘I did,’ she said. ‘Though not always in the manner that they wished or intended. Such is my gift.’

‘What gift?’

‘The foretelling.’

I was intrigued, fascinated, enthralled. ‘What do you foretell for me?’ I asked.

I know that you will at once think that this was an unwise question, that all legend tells us that such inquisition is foolhardy in the extreme. But picture yourself in my stead - not sitting warm and comfortable in your study reading your correspondence, but rather stumbling across the greatest archaeological find of the century. Of any century. Would you not, under such circumstances, in that context, perhaps become a little foolhardy yourself?

And she answered my question before she lapsed again into sleep. Which is why I will not - cannot - allow Louisa or Gregor, or anyone else to visit my Oracle, to gaze on her

wonder or hear her melodic voice. To hear what she has to say. Only you, my friend, only you will I confide in, for I know not what this means, but it wracks me with guilt even before the terrible event. And foreboding, and desperation to know more. But she will tell me no more. When I ask the same question again, or demand elucidation, clarification of her words, she merely tells me: 'What I have spoken, I have spoken.'

But what, you must be wondering, was her original answer to my question about my future? I scarcely dare tell you, I scarcely dare write it, though I hear it in my mind's ear every second of every hour of every day.

For the Oracle said: 'I foretell death. Your own, of course, that is inevitable. But you will take the life of another you love. I foretell this, Oleg Mikelz - would-be destroyer of the Oracle, and murderer most foul.'

Extract ends.

A GAMBLE

During his long and varied life, Hayward Denson had played them all - New Holopia, Rick's, Tropsalon, and of course Vega. His favourite, the place where he felt most comfortable, most at home, most lucky, was Vega. Over the years, mainly since he gave up practising medicine and took up gambling full time, he had acquired wealth, possessions, property. He owned things he never wanted and hardly remembered that he had. And he ran up debts that he left his accountants to worry about paying off. When things were going badly, he knew. That was when the accountants got quiet, that was when they took pains to ensure they were themselves fully paid up to date.

At the moment, things were going well. Vega was like that - it was where Denson came to relax, to enjoy, to win. But, as he kept reminding himself, it was not the winning that was such a buzz, it was the gambling. The winning merely ensured that you could go on gambling. And on and on.

And tonight, things had rarely been better. There were just two of them left in the game now. Denson's opponent was a tall thin man who somehow looked superior, though he could not tell how. The man seemed to have a half-amused expression permanently on his face. He barely glanced at his cards before making decisions. He gave the impression of being in complete control, which Denson found more than a little unsettling. He would enjoy beating this man, would enjoy wiping the smug expression off his face and taking his money.

Denson looked up to see that his opponent had laid down his cards and was watching him, head slightly to one side as if thinking deeply.

'Let's make this interesting, shall we?' the man said. His voice was rich and deep. Again there was that hint of

amusement. Behind him stood several people who had been there the whole way through the game. Friends or relatives. Onlookers and admirers. Denson paid them no heed but attended to the matter in hand, to the game.

‘What do you suggest?’ he asked. His hand was strong but not unassailable. A gamble, then. Good.

‘I have a modest collection of...’ The man shrugged. ‘Things,’ he said eventually. ‘I will wager properties to this value.’ He pulled a silver fountain pen from his jacket pocket and wrote carefully on a small card. Then he handed the card to Denson.

The number on the card seemed to go on for ever. A huge amount of money. Denson licked his drying lips. ‘And what do you suppose I have to bet in return?’ he asked. ‘What makes you think I can afford to match your generous proposal?’ He leant forward attentively. ‘It is well beyond the house limit, I should point out. There is no obligation on my part to match it at all. In fact, I could declare this game invalid merely because you make such an outrageous offer.’

‘Indeed you could. But where’s the fun in that?’ The man leant forward too. Their hands were close to each other’s on the card table. ‘I do not ask you to match the monetary worth of my proposed bet. A trifle in return. Something you won’t even miss, I am sure.’

‘Oh?’

‘I mentioned I have a collection. I am looking for a small property on which to build a suitable repository for it.’ He sat back, folded his arms. ‘You own a small planetoid in the Gamatra sector which is designated KS-159.’

‘If you say so.’ Denson could quite believe it.

The man opened his hands.

‘Is that it?’ Denson asked, surprised. ‘But even a small planet can’t be worth anything like this amount.’ He picked up the card from the table before him and tapped it against his thumbnail. ‘Why not just offer to buy it from me?’

‘Alas, I have something of a cash-flow problem at the moment. Most of my money is tied up in frozen accounts, or in long-term investments where I would incur a heavy

penalty for withdrawal.' The man smiled again. 'I suppose I could win enough to make you an offer, but why bother when I can short-circuit the process and win it outright? And besides,' he added, 'I'm always happy to get something for nothing.'

'And what makes you so sure you will win?'

'If you don't accept, we'll never know. Will we?'

In answer, Denson also wrote on the back of the small card, then tossed it into the middle of the table. 'Very well,' he said. 'KS-159.' He turned his playing cards over with a smile.

And the other man turned his.

Hayward Denson's laughter cut across the casino.

ARRIVALS

Divson Follett was not at all used to travelling steerage in a clapped-out cargo freighter, but times had changed. In many ways, his position as Head of the Archaeology Department of St Oscar's University on Dellah had been a dream fulfilled. In many ways, he supposed, it had been too good to last. But he would never have been able to foretell the apocalyptic circumstances of the end of his tenure.

After the comfort and pleasure of university life, the sudden evacuation of those fortunate to escape the religious purges on Dellah had been a tremendous upheaval. The months in the so-called transit camp on Thanaxos, which was obviously a prison with very little mitigation of its former status made for the refugees, had been even more of a shock. The only way that Follett had managed to come through that experience was by keeping very much to himself. Normally he had been guiltily conscious of the fact that everywhere he went he took with him a gaseous aroma that others found, quite frankly, nauseating. It was in the camp that he had realized for the first time what an advantage this could be. He had taken to making an effort to generate the gaseous output rather than trying to suppress it, with the result that he had succeeded in his desire to be left alone. The end result of that was that he was alive and sane.

In fact, all things considered, Follett was not faring too badly. Certainly in comparison to many of his fellows, who were dead or broke, or both, he was well off. He was alive, pursuing this cryptic offer of gainful employment, and he had some modest savings and investments in off-shore trusts and funds that had not been affected or sequestered by the events on Dellah.

After Follett had been released along with everyone else, the authorities on Thanaxos had made it quite clear just how

welcome the Dellahan refugees really were on their planet. Follett had moved on to Kralinal Maxis, where he had managed to get an apartment while he waited for a work permit. Not that he wanted or intended to do any work. He spent most of his time in a private room at the main library of the capital city, working his way through the academic appointments news and advertisements. There was nothing even close to what he was looking for.

Then, one evening, as he entered his apartment in his usual cloud of chlorinated steam, his scaly foot had trodden on an envelope. It was not remarkable in any way, just a plain white envelope with his name written neatly on it. What was remarkable was that he had received no communications since leaving Dellah and had not told anyone where he was. He did not believe he had any friends as such, and Follett's acquaintances fell into three neat categories: they were dead, no longer interested, or academics. And in the case of the final category there was often considerable overlap with at least one of the other two. Correspondence other than bills and junk mail was not something Follett had been anticipating. So it was with mixed feelings - with both anticipation and trepidation - that he sliced open the envelope with a claw and pulled out the folded paper within.

The next day, he had managed to get passage on the freighter. The captain was surprised that Follett was interested in a ride to a bulk storage facility, at least so far as Follett could tell at the distance he had been keeping as they shouted to each other. But he had nonetheless agreed a very reasonable price for the trip, provided Follett agreed to keep away from the bridge and crew's living quarters. Follett swallowed his pride and accepted the offer.

Which was why, as they came in to land on X One Nine, he was shoehorned into a bucket seat recently bolted to the floor at the back of the hold.

'Landing position, please, Dr Follett,' the captain's voice crackled loudly over the loudspeaker behind Follett's head, making him wince.

He checked his three-point harness, pulling the straps tight over his carapace. Then he took a hermetically sealed plastic jar from the table at his side, clipped open the lid, and took out a small juicy snailoid. The shell crunched in an immensely satisfying way as he bit into the creature. The juicy innards squelched round his mouth as Follett resealed the container and tossed it into his open holdall on the floor ‘at his feet. He could feel the pressure increasing as they came in for the final approach. It made his ears pop, and he was glad he had something to suck on.

‘Are you sure, sir?’ the driver asked, making a brave effort not to retch.

Follett consulted the letter, then showed the address to the driver.

The driver shrugged, holding a handkerchief over his nose and mouth. ‘Fair enough.’ His voice was muffled. ‘Whatever you say.’

The address turned out to be a warehouse. It was between two other warehouses. It looked exactly like all the other warehouses they had passed along the way.

‘Are you sure this is it?’

The driver looked astonished. ‘Sure?’ he repeated. ‘Sure? Of course I’m sure. Now are you getting out or what?’ He tapped meaningfully on the meter.

Follett paid on his gold Cosmic Express card, including a reasonable tip. With luck they would never find a suitable address to send him the bill. Reflecting on his complete lack of luck the last few months, he turned dubiously to regard the warehouse.

‘If you want me to wait...’ Now he had been paid, the driver seemed rather more considerate. Or maybe it was because Follett and his accompanying cloud of gas were outside his cab.

‘Give me ten minutes, if you would, please,’ Follett asked. ‘If I’m not back by then, you can go.’

‘Fair enough.’ The driver settled back in his chair as the window slid up.

There was a small door set into the large double doors on the front of the warehouse. It was unlocked, and Follett warily pushed it open. Inside was dark. As he stepped over the threshold, the lights flooded on. He looked round in surprise, but could see nobody.

‘Hello,’ he called out. ‘Hello - is anyone there?’ Ten minutes he had said. He would give it five. Follett squelched along the aisle of packing crates that faced him, looking round for any signs of recent life.

He was so intent on examining each of the identical crates that he did not notice the figure that had emerged from a small side-aisle until he had almost reached her.

‘Dr Follett, it’s so good of you to come.’

Follett looked up in surprise. He knew that voice. ‘Professor Summerfield.’ His greeting was a mixture of relief, surprise and ill-disguised delight. Of all his staff, whatever his outward show might have been, he had valued Summerfield above almost all others. Even if they had nicknamed her Jonah. ‘I am so glad to see that you escaped from Dellah before... Well, before, you know.’

‘And I’m glad to see you,’ she said. And she reached in through the hazy chlorine mist and took Follett’s scaly hand, shaking it in warm welcome. ‘Come with me, we’ll go and find the others.’

To his surprise, Summerfield led Follett deeper into the warehouse. From outside he could hear the faint noise of a vehicle pulling away. ‘That was never ten minutes,’ he muttered. But was neither surprised nor annoyed. ‘So what’s going on?’ he asked.

‘We thought you’d like the opportunity to do a bit of real archaeology,’ Summerfield said. ‘Just like the good old days. Romantic discoveries in the Tersius sector, that sort of thing.’

‘A refreshing change from sitting in a library,’ Follett agreed. ‘Or rotting away in Academia, come to that.’ He watched in amused amazement as Summerfield led him through a packing crate facade and into what seemed to be a plush apartment. ‘So what are we going to dig up?’ he asked

as they emerged from an entrance hall into a well-appointed drawing room.

‘The Oracle of the Lost,’ Professor Summerfield replied simply, turning to watch his reaction as she spoke.

For a moment, he gaped in silence. He leant closer, as if he had not heard her properly, though he knew he had. ‘I think I need a drink,’ Follett said at last, his voice sounding a little weak even to himself.

‘You’re not the only one,’ a voice said from across the room.

Again, it was a voice he knew. Follett turned slowly to face the elderly woman who was sitting in an armchair on the other side of the room. ‘Dr Emilia Winston,’ he said. ‘I am indeed in hallowed company.’

The lights in the warehouse had switched off after two minutes of no detected movement. As soon as the outer door opened, they came back on. The figure in the doorway paused for just a moment to get his bearings, then he stepped inside. He looked round, frowning in surprise. Just a warehouse after all.

Nevertheless, this was the place, he was sure. He settled himself down on a crate. It could be a long wait.

EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

I was really pleased with the team that we had been able to get together at such short notice. With Follett's arrival, it was complete and we all sat round Braxiatel's large dining table while Jason went over his incredible story once more, this time for the benefit of Follett and Winston.

I must have heard it three or four times by now, so I watched their changing faces as disbelief gave way to increasing enthusiasm. My main worry was that Winston and Follett would get on. Or rather, that they wouldn't. The few times I've seen them together, they've argued and insulted each other in the polite way that masks either a bitter hatred or a grudging affection and respect. So I was betting on the latter. As I watched them sitting at opposite ends of the table, pointedly not looking at each other, I began to wonder if I had guessed right. As heads of rival departments at St Oscar's, vying for a bigger share of the same funding, they had been brought into conflict over various issues whether they wanted to be or not. Follett had defended his Archaeology Department against all financial assaults, while Winston had stood equally intransigent for the History Department she headed.

While Follett and Winston would provide solid, experienced academic credentials, the rest of our team was drawn from the immediately available talent. That meant myself, Braxiatel, Jason, Clarence and Garshal. And Joseph and Wolsey, if you really want to play up the numbers.

When Jason finished his story, I stood up to say a few words. I was a bit apprehensive about taking charge of people who used to be my superiors, especially Follett. I always found him rather dictatorial at St Oscar's and got bullied into

doing things I wouldn't otherwise have agreed to.¹ 'We've already decided that we're going,' I told them, trying to sound authoritative. Though actually, without them I'm not sure we would even attempt the expedition. Braxiatel's considerable wealth seemed to be tied up either in long-term bonds - and he meant long term - or still stuck in the middle of legal wranglings over the frozen assets of Dellah and all her inhabitants. So we were dependent on the goodwill of our friends and acquaintances.

'We don't have much funding, I'm afraid,' I explained. 'So for those of you who know what a picnic is, this won't be one. But we have cobbled together some provisions and ? equipment and we think we can make a go of it.' I looked first at Winston, then Follett as I told them: 'The question is, do you, and you, want to join us?'

It was the defining moment, I guess. Winston looked at Follett, and Follett looked back at her, and I looked at Braxiatel and crossed my fingers behind my back.

'What do you think, Dr Follett?' Winston asked at last.

'Intriguing,' he said, exhaling a long stream of that ghastly pale green mist. 'Fascinating.'

'I agree.' She tried to stifle a cough. We all did, I think.

'My feeling is,' Follett said slowly, 'that if Dr Winston is willing to lend the weight of her considerable experience and talent to the venture, then I would be more than happy to work alongside her.'

Emilia Winston's eyes narrowed slightly and I held my breath. For all sorts of reasons. 'With Dr Follett's help,' she said at last, 'I would count it a privilege to accept.'

I sat down again at that. Partly because my legs seemed to have swapped molecular structure with a large jelly. But even so, I could feel my face settling into a huge grin. Across the table, Braxiatel and Jason were smiling back at me. 'Yeah!' I said with feeling.

¹ Note - previous two sentences covered by yellow sticky note with the following amendment: I had no trouble taking charge of people who used to be my superiors, especially Follett. I had always been ready to argue with him at St Oscar's and stand up for what I felt was the right thing to do, after all.

DEPARTURE

The door opened, but Braxiatel stopped. For a moment everyone else stood in the hallway, waiting for him to step out into the warehouse. He didn't. They were on their way to the spaceport to check over Braxiatel's rented ship and start organizing the packing.

When it became apparent that Braxiatel was not going to move, Benny said: 'What is it?'

'The lights should come on when the door opens,' he said quietly. 'They sense the movement.'

Benny thought about this for a second. 'The lights are on,' she pointed out gently.

He nodded. 'But they didn't come on. That's not the same.'

Benny frowned. 'So they hadn't gone out.' She pushed past him. 'Come on.' Wolsey ran after her. Braxiatel paused a fraction longer, then followed. The others filed out after him, Joseph bobbing about silently above their heads.

'The thing is,' Braxiatel said as he caught up with Benny, 'they should have gone out. Unless they detected movement.'

Benny stopped. 'You mean, like an elderly gentleman with steel-grey hair and a moustache sitting on a packing crate swinging his legs?' she asked.

'Unlikely.'

'But distinctly possible.' She pointed. 'He's over there. I think he's after a rematch.'

The man had seen them too and stood up as they approached. He waited without comment for the group to reach him.

Mr Denson,' Braxiatel said calmly. 'How nice to see you again. You're a long way from Vega.'

‘Indeed.’ The old man nodded vigorously. ‘Indeed. I very much enjoyed our little game, you know.’ His right hand was deep in his jacket pocket.

‘You do want a rematch,’ Benny said. She could make a good guess what he was holding inside his jacket. Behind her she could hear Jason muttering explanations to the others.

‘Nothing so mundane, I’m afraid.’ He took his hand from his pocket. It was empty. ‘Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?’

‘Of course,’ Benny said. ‘Friends, this is Hayward Denson. He plays cards and owns stuff. Mr Denson, these are my friends.’

Denson raised his eyebrows. ‘How do you all do?’ he asked.

‘Speaking for myself,’ Clarence answered, ‘by means of a socially aware processing system clad in a biologically formed

‘Thank you, Clarence,’ Benny said quickly. ‘So what can we do for you?’ she asked Denson.

‘Well, after your friend here beat me at cards, I got thinking,’ he said. ‘And I thought, why would they be so desperate to get hold of the title and rights to a lump of rock in the middle of nowhere?’

‘Why indeed?’ Braxiatel murmured.

‘So I did some checking, and you know KS-159 really is a lump of rock in the middle of nowhere. No mineral concerns of note, no strategic or commercial value, no current interests.’ He smiled thinly, grey lips pulled back over grey teeth. ‘Which hardly answered my question.’

‘So you thought you’d come and ask us in person?’

‘Exactly. Exactly so.’

‘Clever of you to find us,’ Benny observed.

‘Oh, not really. You see I planted a tracker on him.’ His smile widened. ‘Just in case there was a problem with the land registry, you understand. In case I had to get in touch.’

Benny was aghast. ‘You let him plant a tracker on you?’ she hissed at Braxiatel.

He was shaking his head. ‘No, of course not. I’d know.’ He frowned.

‘I do beg your pardon,’ Denson said politely. ‘Not oil him -’ He nodded at Braxiatel. ‘I could tell he wasn’t a person to bug. I planted it on *him*.’

Everyone slowly turned to look at Jason. He took a small step backward, embarrassed.

‘Git,’ said Benny.

‘Well,’ Jason said quickly, his voice slightly louder and slightly higher than usual, ‘now you’ve found us. So what do you want?’

Denson shrugged. ‘Just an answer to my question. To satisfy my curiosity.’

‘I’ve heard that one before,’ Benny muttered just loud enough for him to hear.

‘KS-159 is not of current interest, but of historical interest,’ Emilia Winston told him.

‘Archaeologically important,’ Follett added.

‘And no longer your concern,’ Garshal rasped.

Denson tapped his cheek with his index finger. ‘Which would be why you’ve rented a cargo hopper and bought up some rather dilapidated second-hand excavating equipment, I take it.’

‘That’s quite a curiosity you have there, Mr Denson,’ Braxiatel said, an edge to his voice.

‘I like to keep in touch.’

‘So you said.’

‘And you wanted my little planet so you could go and dig it up, is that right?’

Benny sighed. ‘You wouldn’t understand,’ she said. ‘It’s time we were going.’ She turned away, ready to walk off.

‘You’re right. I don’t think I do understand. But I’m always keen to learn. I think I shall come with you, if I may.’

Benny turned back, exchanged glances with Braxiatel. ‘And what makes you think that?’

‘Perhaps I can help. As I say, I’m keen to learn. It will make a refreshing change from business and gambling, which are after all two sides of the same thing.’

‘And how can you help?’ Braxiatel asked, not impolitely. ‘What have you to offer?’

‘Two things, I believe. First, money - which I know you are short of just now. If nothing else we can get some decent excavators and set up a satellite net over the place for GPS.’

‘That would help enormously with cataloguing and location mapping,’ Follett said quietly.

‘And the second thing?’ Benny asked.

‘By training, though I confess to a lack of recent practice, I am a physician.’ Denson looked round at them. ‘Of course, you may already have medical expertise in your team, and I do not pretend to be able to cope with all the varied anatomies and alien differences. But I can at least treat humans.’

Benny laughed. ‘That narrows it down a bit. Me, Dr Winston and Jason. And I’m not always sure about Jason.’ She regarded Denson for a long while, neither of them speaking. ‘What if we refuse?’ she asked at last. ‘What terrible retribution will you visit upon us?’

Denson seemed genuinely surprised at the question. ‘Why, nothing,’ he said, blinking. ‘If you don’t want my help, I don’t want to come. But I think I have something to offer and the trip sounds intriguing.’ He paused, then said: ‘I’m sorry. I can see I’ve wasted my time. Thank you for answering my question, though.’ He half turned, then hesitated. ‘I would be grateful if you would tell me if you find whatever it is you are looking for though. Just for interest. Also, I would be interested to know how you’re going to get past the satellite defences.’

‘Defences?’ Benny looked at Braxiatel. ‘Wait a second.’ He gave a hint of a nod, just enough. ‘All right then,’ Benny said, taking Denson’s arm and steering him towards the main doors out of the warehouse, ‘let’s go shopping.’

It delayed them for a day, but everyone agreed it was well worth the wait. Denson was as good as his word, and within hours cargo freighters were arriving at the spaceport and unloading packages, crates and vehicles marked for his

attention. He had built up a diverse and comprehensive business empire, and was able to supply much of what Benny and Follett decided they needed off the shelf from his own factories and plants.

So despite their initial apprehension, by the time they were ready to leave, and Denson had admitted that actually there were no satellite defences, everyone had rather taken to the old man with his enquiring mind and sense of humour. It was not so much that he was a ready wit or had a supply of jokes and anecdotes from his past life. Rather, he was able to find humour in everything around him, to appreciate the funny side of life, to laugh at the oldest and corniest joke. And his humour was infectious. His presence helped to bond the team together, to thaw the still-fragile relationship between Follett and Winston in ways that would otherwise have taken days if not weeks.

As they lifted away from the spaceport, Benny found herself feeling well satisfied with their preparations and progress. She sat at the back of the hopper, deliberately keeping clear of the others. She wanted some time to think, some time to catch up on her diary, and some time to read more of Watkinson's biography. Even so, when Follett 'slushed his way back to where she was seated and asked if he might join her, she found herself more prepared to tolerate the sickly sweet smell that came with him than she would ever have been at the university. Perhaps, she thought, it was the lack of threat, the stripping of authority and the trappings of the regimented department life he had embodied that made a difference.

'I promise not to disturb you,' Benny's erstwhile boss said as he sagged into a chair two considerate seats clear of her. 'I can see you intend to work.' He nodded at her diary.

Benny smiled. 'Thank you.' She showed him the biography. 'I have some background reading to catch up on too. You know it?' She was sure he did, was certain she had heard he was a student of Pottle's.

Follett nodded. 'Oh, yes. Though I've not read it for a while, I must confess. Watkinson was a fascinating man. Fascinating. As, in his own way, was Herve Pottle, of course.'

'Weren't you a student of his?'

'And, I like to think, in later years a friend.' He settled back in the seat, staring off into nowhere. 'One of the last times we met was when he was preparing to write that very biography. A bit of a departure for him. I remember he had just interviewed Watkinson's personal assistant. His secretary, Irma Fendcastle. That was about the Oracle, or about Mikelz's quest for it at least.'

'Go on,' said Benny.

'Oh, you don't want to suffer the musings of an old archaeologist.' He turned to face her, his deep-set red eyes twinkling through the faint mist. 'They're even more boring than those of a young archaeologist, and you know how they can be.'

Benny said nothing. She just smiled. She knew he would tell her anyway.

RECOLLECTIONS OF DIVSON FOLLETT

She was in her later years then, of course. I mean, when Pottle spoke with her. And Pottle was old when he recounted the story to me. Just as now I am old as I tell you, Benny. So allowances must be made, as ever, for the inevitable embellishments of oral tradition.

I forget how the subject came up. We were talking, sharing a dish or two of slugwort. I think Pottle was on his way out to take up some sinecure on the outer rim. One of the white tile universities that was all the fashion back then. He was passing within a few parsecs and thought he'd look me up. For old times' sake. Star pupil, I was. Ahem, as I say, it was a long time ago.

But we got to talking about Edward Watkinson, as archaeologists did, and still do, when they've had a few slugworts too many. I may have mentioned that one of my ambitions was to rise to head of department and then endow a chair in his name.

'Well,' he said, 'we can all dream.' I think he was meaning about becoming head of department, but I let it go with a smile.

I didn't know until then that he was working on the biography. His last great work, he called it, though I think that secretly he was a little embarrassed by the fact that his great work would be the retelling of the story of an even greater archaeologist than himself. He got by, I imagine, by knowing that nobody else could even come close to doing as good a job as he could. It must have rankled, though, just a little. It's to alleviate such feelings that publishers give advances I suppose.

So, he explained this project to me, this great biography that would encapsulate the man's life and work and philosophy, while at the same time teaching the reader how

great Herve Pottle himself was, presumably by some process of literary osmosis. I asked how it was going, and he said it was all at the formative stage. Which I took to mean it was an idea in the mind of some lesser-known god rather than anything that would actually see the light of day.

But as he spoke, and as his enthusiasm burgeoned, I realized that he had actually done an incredible amount of research on Watkinson. As if just reading everything he wrote wasn't a prodigious enough feat.

So the subject of Irma Fendcastle came up. Not because she was especially important to Watkinson's story. Indeed no, she was his secretary for only a couple of academic years at the end of his life, no more. But Pottle had spoken with her just the previous week, and was still writing up his notes.

Most of what he told me, I have to say, did not rate the relevance threshold that the biography demanded when he came to write it. Rightly so, in my opinion. She could recount what the great man had for lunch on a regular basis, and how his rooms were decorated. Stuff like that. But since he handled all his own correspondence and writing, she was unable to shed light on any matters of importance beyond the appointments on his calendar. And they were already in the public domain.

But she did recall one thing that might interest you here. Almost to the end of his life, Watkinson, as I say, handled his own correspondence. He was, as an occupational hazard I dare say, incredibly old-fashioned in some ways. Despite his ready adoption of the new technologies for archaeological purposes, he was something of a correspondence philistine, if you understand the allusion. Mmm, I thought you would.

So he insisted that Miss Fendcastle produce print-outs of all his correspondence for his perusal. He would reply online, of course. But first he went through the hardcopies with an antique fountain pen and scratched illegible and inscrutable notes in the margin. You may recall that Pottle recounts the example of a student sending him a note in which she described the less than adequate accommodation furnished her on an exchange visit to Placedon Minimus. She mentions

some tiny life-forms which she found clustered on the window ledge, and in the margin Watkinson had scrawled, so far as anyone can tell, 'Probably fleas.'

I am afraid that the denouement of this tale will be less interesting to you than the lead-in. But that is so often true in life, after all. But, in short, Miss Fendcastle insisted to Pottle that the Mikelz-Watkinson Letter, as it is known, was actually the first in a series of missives which arrived for Watkinson from Delfus-Orestes via encoded microwave link. Since they were encrypted, she was unable to read them and insists that she never read any of the correspondence that Watkinson received in any case. This does rather beg the question of how she knew they were encrypted, but Pottle says he let that pass.

Irma Fendcastle, then, claims from a position of some authority, that Mikelz sent Watkinson not just the one intriguing epistle which survives and is indeed reprinted by Pottle, but three lengthy messages.

I see that you are already reaching the same inevitable question that Pottle asked and which I in my turn enquired of him. Given that Watkinson was meticulous in his filing, and was renowned for never destroying or deleting a single thing, however trivial, what happened to these two messages? They must, after all, rank among the most important he ever received. Indeed, if one or both of them actually assisted him in coming to the decisions which ultimately led to his disappearance, then it is hardly something Watkinson would inadvertently mislay or erase. So, I asked myself then and we ask ourselves now: what was it that Mikelz told Watkinson that he found so unpalatable he went counter to a lifetime's behaviour and instinct and deliberately destroyed them? What was it of such consequence that befell Mikelz on Delfus-Orestes - where we are now bound?

EXCAVATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

The task was enormous, and it was hardly surprising that without exception everyone wanted to start in the Oracle Chamber. But it was not to be.

Benny agreed, reluctantly, with Follett and Winston's proposal that for the time being the entrance to the chamber be sealed and the first glimpse of the Oracle of the Lost left until the satellites had been deployed.

'That could take days,' Denson had said, more than a little frustrated.

'Nevertheless,' Follett said, 'we must wait. We need the satellites you so generously brought to establish a global positioning net of suitable accuracy. Then we can begin land-mapping and building up a picture of the relative layers of archaeology. This in turn will provide us with a predictive model.'

'So we can see the most likely places for excavation,' Benny explained. 'And the more we discover, the more data we have for the model and the better the predictions get. And more to the point, in the case of the Oracle Chamber, we can tie the GPS into the digital video cameras so that just by photographing the artefacts and features we discover, their size and exact position is mapped on to the model too. Much quicker in the long run than trying to measure and plot everything by hand.'

Denson was not convinced. 'How does the camera tell where things are?' he asked.

Winston explained: 'The camera signals constantly to the satellites. We deploy them so there are always at least three visible above the horizon. Two will do for triangulation, which gives the camera its exact position. Then the camera uses infra-red to measure the distance to the object it's

photographing. That distance, together with the angle, gives us its position relative to the camera.'

'So it's quicker to wait?'

'Exactly.'

'I don't know,' Follett mumbled as he sorted through some of the equipment, 'things lie buried for millennia and then people are impatient enough to want to dig them up overnight.' He struggled to untangle a bundle of wires from around a graduometer, shaking his head enough to send clouds of mist floating off in all directions like a halo.

It was the same graduometer which detected the magnetic variance that led them to Mikelz's base camp. The magnetic data, together with output from ground-penetrating radar and resistivity readings, was fed into the geographical information system built up initially by the GPS as the satellites started to come online. In among the faint outline of the stone of the temple, were other readings of interest. One was a large area of increased conductivity, outside the temple but close to the Oracle Chamber itself, which they decided for now to ignore. The other was the obvious square box of the prefabricated survey station from the previous expedition. It was not a great distance from their own camp, which they had set up round the cargo hopper in which they had arrived. So far there was no indication of how Mikelz and his team had travelled.

Garshal had been given the task of programming the sand-blowers to uncover the temple, taking the data they were building up in the Geographical Information System as his basis for setting their depth and direction parameters. It was he who suggested starting with Mikelz's base.

'That will give us a trial run in setting up and deploying the equipment,' he said. 'If there are problems, we will damage only this secondary site and not the main buildings.'

It made sense, and despite the fact this meant even further delays before starting the real work of excavating the Temple of the Lost, everyone was in agreement.

The blowers were impressive vehicles once they got going. The principle was simple. Guided by the data from the satellite survey and instructions input by Garshal, they sucked up the surface of the planet to a predefined depth and blew it out again. They could either blow it out over the landscape around them, or store the sand and dirt in huge hoppers they dragged in their wake to be dumped later.

The skill was in predicting the depth to which to excavate without disturbing vital data or relics. In this Garshal was helped by the fact that the process was actually quite gentle. It might scoop up small artefacts by mistake, but it would not disturb a building like the temple. But he was hindered by the fact he had to take the increasing weight of the vehicle into account when plotting its course, and to determine where and when on its route to divert to empty the hopper. A trial run on Mikelz's base was a welcome practice exercise.

In the event, everything went better than could have been expected. There was something of a party atmosphere, albeit laced with a little apprehension, as the team gathered on a nearby cliff to watch as three sand blowers moved ponderously across the landscape below. They traced complex paths, curving round on each other's heels, burrowing ever deeper into the sand. Before long, the roof of the square plastic building was visible through a thin layer of sand. Garshal watched through field glasses, his hand clenched on a remote control unit in case the blowers continued too low. But almost as soon as the roof was visible, they rolled slowly to where the edge of the building could now be seen, and proceeded to circle round it, digging away the sand that surrounded the base.

When the lumbering machines were done, the building stood proud of the sand, in the middle of a huge excavated hollow and almost completely intact. The last of the blowers ground to a halt, sending up a puff of sand as the exhaust ports reversed thrust in order to stop it. There was a smattering of applause from the team, and Benny was surprised to see that they had been watching the process for

almost two hours. Both the speed of the process and the fact that it had held them all entranced for so long was incredible.

Without comment, Braxiatel produced a trolley from behind a nearby sand dune. It was laden with chilled champagne and glasses, and he proceeded to hand round drinks.

The party atmosphere continued as they half stumbled, half slid down the sandy sides of the hollow to the building. It lasted, in fact, until they found the bodies.

There were two of them, lying close together in the main living quarters of the building. Some sand had blown in under the door seals, but the building was largely unaffected by its years of burial. The skeletal remains, by contrast, were all but rotted down to the bones. A few fragments of clothing still clung to the frail forms, together with patches of disintegrating flesh.

Denson immediately knelt between them, examining first one, then the other. 'Human,' he declared. 'One male, one female.' He held out his arm, and Garshal helped him back to his feet. 'They've been here a while,' he said, dusting his hands off on his jacket.

'Eighty years?' Follett suggested.

Denson nodded. 'Could be about that.'

'What did they die of?' Benny asked. 'Can you tell?'

'I'll do a post-mortem of course. Very post.'

'Very mortem,' Braxiatel said. 'But the way they died does I seem pretty apparent.'

Denson nodded. 'Both of them. Shot through the head. At close range judging by the way the skulls have shattered. Probably a small focused-energy weapon.'

They photographed everything in the building in place, including the bodies, before Denson supervised their removal to the small medical lab he had set up in the hold of the hopper.

Despite the sombre note, the excavation of Mikelz's base had proved two things: Garshal had the blowers ready for the main task, and the satellite net was up and running. With a sense of dedication for which Benny envied him, Garshal sat

up all through the short night plotting the blowers' courses for excavating the main building. By morning, he was confident that he was ready to start.

In comparison with the small building Mikelz had erected, the temple was huge. Progress seemed far slower, even with all six of the blowers they had brought. Benny soon tired of watching the vehicles trace their paths over and round the emerging temple ruins, and retired to her quarters to write her diary. They each had a modest cabin in the base camp, arranged off spine corridors splaying out from a shared living area. Along each of the spines was storage space and a small bathroom. One spine had a kitchenette and dining area rather than personal accommodation. Denson's quarters were closest to the ship, since his medlab was in the now-empty cargo bay. The whole unit was prefabricated and there were three empty cabins.

It did not seem to Benny that she had been gone long. She worked steadily, recording her memories, thoughts, and impressions in her diary. The room was in near-darkness, the pool of light from the heavy desk lamp affording the only illumination. It focused her attention on the writing, on her thoughts. She was surprised to see that several hours had elapsed when she eventually laid down her pen. A moment later, there was a knock at the door.

It was Jason. 'I think you should come outside,' he said.

'Why?' she asked. 'Have you run out of other people to annoy?'

He looked hurt, and she slapped him on the shoulder. 'Come on, then. I know you've been trying to help.' She had watched him kicking around at a loose end, trying to find something helpful to do, and being sent away in turn by Garshal, Follett, Winston and eventually Denson. Only Braxiatel had time for Jason's company, it seemed. But Jason had soon seemed tired of trailing around after him wondering what the hell he was up to.

'He's assessing what it would take to terraform this place, to set up an archive,' Benny had explained when Jason asked her.

‘Oh,’ Jason had replied. And they left it at that.

‘So what’s happening?’ Benny asked as she grabbed her jacket from a chair and followed him back along the corridor to the central hub and the main doors.

‘I thought you’d want to see the temple,’ he said. The blowers are about done. It’s...’ He paused, just for a moment. ‘It’s incredible.’

‘It must be, if you’re impressed.’ She was at the doors ahead of him. ‘Why didn’t you get me sooner?’

‘Didn’t like to disturb you.’

‘Oh I’m disturbed ahead-’ She broke off as she looked out over the changed landscape. ‘Bugger me,’ she said softly.

The view was always impressive - the massive ringed planet hanging majestically above them as they stared out directly into space through the transparent sheen of an oxygen-rich and completely unpolluted atmosphere.

Below, the land was rocky and bleak, as before. But now, on the top of a craggy cliff above the survey base stood the ruined Temple of the Lost. It was classical in design - Greco-Roman in appearance. The original building had been a mass of pillars, not unlike the Acropolis, Benny thought. And it was enormous.

Now there was the outline of the original structure, defined by the pillars that were still standing in their entirety - holding up what remained of the roof. The rest of the pillars, and the remains of the roof and fallen walls, were tumbled and strewn across the barren top of the shelf of rock on which the temple was built.

Barely visible at the back of the temple - the focal point - was the Oracle. As Benny stared up, shielding her eyes in an attempt to get a slightly better view, she could just see the massive golden statue, sitting on a huge stone throne. An impossibly beautiful woman dressed in a thin white robe of the type beloved by heroines in Ray Harryhausen movies. Unlike the temple, the Oracle seemed, at a distance, untouched by the ravages of time.

The temple stonework had fared less well, Benny could see as they approached. It was once carved with inscriptions

and bas-reliefs. It had once been festooned (if that was the right word) with statuary and shone brilliant white like ivory. There were hints of this still, but now the stonework was cracked, the colour faded, the carvings worn smooth by time and the relentless, inexorable attention of the elements.

'Talk about somewhere over the rainbow,' she murmured as they approached. And the brilliant, multicoloured rings around the planet in the sky above the temple did indeed look like a rainbow arcing down over the ruins.

Benny hardly noticed Jason beside her as they worked their way up the steep slope towards the building. The blowers were moving away, their work done. The final layers of sand and the low mounds left where they had detected artefacts and structure above the level of the floor would be cleared using hand-held vacuums and good old-fashioned shovels and trowels. Across the other side of the temple, Benny could see several small figures converging on the site. She could make out Follett and Winston, both carrying video cameras, both sweeping the area ahead of them as they walked slowly forward, letting the cameras map every last detail. Once they were done, the others could follow in their wake, and then the real work would begin. She could feel the thrill of anticipation welling up inside her, the tension that she always experienced when she just could not wait to get started.

Jason and Benny helped each other up the steep slope, each in turn slipping and sliding backward a few feet as they hauled themselves up to the temple. At last they were standing on the level top of the rocky shelf, looking up at the carved pillars, staring at the massive stonework. A faint breeze disturbed the thin layer of sand that still lay on the flagged floor.

They were at the far end of the temple from the Oracle, looking directly through archways into the distant Oracle Chamber. Without a word they both started walking towards the huge seated figure. They negotiated the small sand dunes left by the excavation process, several of the larger ones compacted and quite hard. Around them, Benny was aware

of the others also converging on that point. Braxiatel and Denson were following in the wake of Follett and Winston. Garshal and Clarence were a little way behind them. And in the air above, Benny could see Joseph hovering. Only Wolsey was absent, curled up asleep on Benny's bed when she had last seen him earlier.

She was aware suddenly of Jason's exclamation as he stopped and bent down.

'What is it?' Her throat was dry, her voice husky.

He stood upright again, holding something he had picked from the sand at their feet. He handed it to her.

It was a coin. Surprisingly well preserved, the Delfan inscription and the head of the Oracle were clear on one side. The other was worn almost flat.

'Congratulations,' Benny said with a smile. 'Your first genuine archaeological find.'

Jason grinned back. 'Hardly.'

'I did say "genuine".' She handed it back to him.

Jason inspected the coin with an air of suspicion. 'Is it valuable?'

'Huh.' She turned away in disgust.

'I mean archaeologically.' His annoyance at her reaction was obvious.

'You mean archaeologically, do you?' She snatched the coin back from his surprised fingers. 'Let me see.' She glanced at it. 'No,' she said. 'Not really.' She gave him a half-smile. 'So you may keep it.'

'Thanks.' He made to take it. But Benny was walking again, the coin held away from him.

'Not so fast,' she said. 'This needs to be a major souvenir. A momentous occasion. Jason Kane is interested in archaeological rather than financial value. In those terms this coin is priceless.' She was fumbling in her jacket pocket for her laser scalpel.

'What are you doing?' Jason asked as she stooped down and held the coin between her thumb and forefinger, careful to keep them away from the beam of the scalpel. 'Hey!'

‘Hang on,’ she insisted. A tiny hole appeared near the top of the coin. Not quite big enough. So she drilled another beside it, slightly overlapping, joining. A sideways figure of eight. Infinity. ‘There you are.’

‘There what?’

She was rummaging through her pockets again, the scalpel back in her jacket as she hunted for a piece of broken boot lace. She knew she had one somewhere. ‘Ah, here we are.’

Yes, it was about the right length. Benny sucked the frayed end for a couple of seconds, then threaded it through the hole in the coin. The first attempt missed, the cord buckling as it caught on the side of the hole.

‘No comments about threading needles, please,’ she said as she tried again. ‘Just remember, it’s easier for a camel... There, that’ll do it.’ She knotted the end of the boot lace together and dangled the resulting medallion in front of Jason. ‘Gold medal for archaeological excavation,’ she said. ‘Well, a copper alloy of some sort anyway.’

‘Thanks.’ He took the coin from her and pushed the loop over his head. He looked at the coin for a moment as it rested on his shirt, then tucked it inside, out of sight. ‘I’ll wear it always,’ he said. ‘For ever.’

‘I’ve heard that before,’ Benny said with a laugh. Then she took him by the hand and led him towards the Oracle.

THE ORACLE OF THE LOST

It seemed to Benny as if the Oracle was watching them as they approached. Braxiatel, Winston, Follett and Denson were already standing in front of the statue, gazing up in amazed awe. They barely reached up to her knees. Even Garshal's massive figure, standing with Clarence a little away from the others, was dwarfed by the seated woman.

Apart from her size, she was incredibly lifelike. The contours of the face, the way the simple white dress was sculpted over her golden form, the slightly amused twist to the mouth, the arm uplifted as if in greeting and the cloth of the sleeve that hung down from it, all were sculpted to beautiful perfection. Even the strands of her golden hair falling over her bare shoulders seemed individually exact. Her beauty seemed to have withstood the ravages of time and stood firm against the elements which had ruined the temple and toppled its ornate pillars. She was unblemished, flawless. And she was watching them, just as she had watched the ages lay waste her temple, Benny was sure of it now.

For a while they just stood there, staring. A semicircle of people standing in front of a seated figure in the ruins of a temple. Silent and still.

'Well,' said Benny after what seemed an eternity, 'this is certainly one of the major high points of my archaeological career. Can anyone top this?'

From the ensuing silence, it seemed that nobody could.

'Is she... alive?' Denson asked quietly.

'Why not ask her?' Braxiatel suggested. 'She was built to answer questions.'

'Just don't expect a helpful answer,' Benny warned. 'Oracles are apparently like that. Be careful what you ask.' She looked up at the huge face high above them, and it

seemed to her that the Oracle's smile had widened ever so slightly.

Denson looked round at the others, as if for approval. Follett was nodding vigorously, sending clouds of steam up into the air. Winston shrugged.

'Go for it,' Jason said.

Denson cleared his throat. 'Are... are you alive?' he called up at the Oracle.

The eyes seemed to acquire a sheen, a glow almost, as the huge head angled slightly, looking down at them. A few strands of golden hair fell forward off the shoulders. Her voice was almost musical, loud yet soft.

'I am what I am,' she said. 'Is an angel alive?' Her head turned slightly towards Clarence, who stared back at her impassively, wings folded on his back. 'I have speech,' she continued after a moment. 'I have movement, to a degree. I reason. I am aware. If this is life, then I am alive.' There was a short pause, then she added, 'How many of you can boast the same? Now, or in a hundred years?' Another slight pause. 'Or five? Or one?'

'How old are you?' Winston asked.

'As old as my oldest component. Or my newest. Alive since I woke, or since I was reawakened. As old as my form. Or as old as my substance, as old as the formation of the ore and the solidification of the stone. As old as my atoms and molecules. As young as the Universe.'

'See what I mean?' Benny said.

Slowly, the Oracle's head angled towards her. 'What you mean, and also what you are,' the musical voice said.

'There are some questions,' Benny called up to the statue, 'that are not meant to be answered. A quick revision course in rhetoric might do you some good.'

'We should be making notes, recording this,' Follett said, raising his camera.

'We should be getting on with the excavation,' Braxiatel countered. 'I suggest we ask one question each, those who want to, then work out our plans and schedules for the next few days.'

'I agree,' Winston said. 'There will be plenty of time for talking to the Oracle. The main thing now is to record what we have uncovered and ensure it's properly preserved. Don't you agree, Dr Follett?'

'Indeed.' He lowered the camera. 'Indeed, yes. Doctor. How right you are. We can design some questions to define semantic limitations of the Oracle later, test her parameters.'

'So who's going first?' Benny asked. She turned to Jason, but he looked away.

'No thanks. There's nothing I want to know.'

Benny frowned. 'Really? Know it all, do you?'

'Well, I've had my turn,' Denson said. 'How about you, sir?' he asked Braxiatel.

Braxiatel seemed to consider, tapping his chin with a finger. 'All right,' he said, sounding as if he was amused by the notion. 'Though I'm not sure it's really fair.' He looked up at the Oracle, and said: 'Shall I ever return to my people?'

It seemed to Benny that a wistful quality had crept into his voice, a trace of melancholy, as if he already knew the answer.

The Oracle's reply surprised her, though. 'My friend,' she said quietly, 'you know I cannot say.' And it seemed there was a note of sadness in her voice too.

'Yes, I know,' said Braxiatel quietly. 'I know.'

Before anyone could comment on this exchange, Garshal stepped forward. His hands were bunched into fists at his sides, and Benny could see that he was nervous. His voice was loud, insistent as he asked: 'Will I die honourably, like my commander?'

'There is little honour in dying alone in the dark,' the Oracle replied.

Garshal took a step backward. 'Explain,' he hissed. Benny could see that he too recognized the words as his own.

But all the Oracle said was: 'What I have spoken, I have spoken.'

Garshal's fists clenched and unclenched as he stared back at her. Then he looked to Clarence standing beside him. 'There is no help to be had here,' he said.

'Nevertheless, it is an opportunity,' Clarence replied. 'If there is a chance for the truth...' He turned to the Oracle. 'Who am I?' he asked, the faint breeze ruffling the feathers on his folded wings. 'What was I?'

'Ask not what you were, or who you are. Rather look to fashion what you will become. If you think you were a shipherd, so be it. If you believe you are Evets Netsua, that is who you are. Above all, know yourself - as you are and as you would be, !C-Mel.'

Clarence frowned. 'Who is !C-Mel?' he murmured. But if the Oracle heard, she did not answer.

Benny knew. She could remember a huge Ship, a Ship of massive intelligence and power that just wanted things its own way. That got talking and plotting with the wrong people. That tried to kill its god and all his people. And suddenly, in that blindingly obvious way that leaves a hole in the pit of the stomach, a lot of things made sense.

Benny was barely aware that Follett was talking now. She was not sure if he was addressing his question to the Oracle or to the rest of them when he asked, 'How soon do you think we can be finished here?'

But whatever his intent, it was the Oracle who answered. Again there was a hint of sadness in her voice, a cadence. 'You will be finished here very soon, Divson Follett. Very soon.'

'It knows us, knows us all,' Denson whispered loudly. 'Incredible.'

'Not really.' Braxiatel took a step towards the Oracle, staring up at her impassive face. 'Some mild telepathy furnishes names and background. Then she plugs that into a model of the universe, builds up that model from what she learns and makes predictions based on the model and her knowledge of social and behavioural patterns.'

'You make it sound simple,' Winston said.

Braxiatel smiled. 'In theory it is. Not so very different from how we build up our model of the site from the available data. Then we keep adding to that model while also using it to make predictions and interpretations. But the theory is one thing. Actually building such a thing, and getting it to work.' He gave a low whistle. 'Well, to call her a work of genius would be an understatement, I think.'

'Does that mean,' Jason asked slowly, 'that there are certain types of questions she is better able to answer than others?'

Braxiatel nodded. 'I would say so, yes. The broader the question, the more accurate the answer. Except of course that the broader the question, the less useful the answer. There's a sort of built-in crypticism.'

'Great,' Jason said. 'So we can only get decent answers to questions that are no help.'

'Or if the answers are blindingly obvious,' Benny said. 'For instance,' she went on turning her face towards the Oracle, 'will there be war?'

'There is always war,' the Oracle said. 'War is a natural state. But I know that you ask about a particular war. And the answer is in the laps of the gods. Unless...' She let the word hang in the air, as if it were itself an answer of sorts.

'Unless what?'

'Unless,' the Oracle repeated. 'There is always the *unless*, just as there is always war. I see suns and planets burning away into the void.' She was staring out across the landscape, as if watching the future she described. 'I see past, present, future all in turmoil, writhing together in the maelstrom, fused into forever. I see beginnings and endings, life and death played out again and again. Worlds die, and are reborn, then die again as each side gains the upper hand. Time itself is stripped bare, picked clean, and her bones scattered across this universe and the next. And I see you, existing again and again, not existing, never having existed. A time where time itself is forever in flux, where nothing is or was or shall ever be again. All things come to a beginning.'

For a long while, nobody spoke.

It astounded Emilia Winston how quickly the amazing was absorbed into the background, how soon they all became blasé about the Oracle. By the following morning, it was as if the incredible statue really was just some sculptor's magnificent folly. Garshal and Braxiatel cleared away the top layer of sand from the temple, and Winston and Follett continued to map the positions of every uncovered artefact and feature. Finally, Benny and Clarence started on the work of removing and cataloguing each find. Denson went from group to group, utterly fascinated by the work and helping where he could.

Jason went from group to group utterly bored and generally getting in the way. He seemed nervous, on edge about the whole thing, which Winston put down to his being out of his depth and having little background in archaeology. Or anything very academic or learned at all, she suspected. She had no idea what Benny saw in the man, but there was something. She could tell from the way Benny looked at Jason when he wasn't watching, from the way they ignored each other at meals, from the way they were so rude to each other so much of the time. And it brought back happy-sad memories of her own.

As they worked, the Oracle seemed to watch them, while Wolsey wandered apparently aimlessly round the site and Joseph hovered equally aimlessly above it.

'What is that?' Benny asked. The movement on the screen had captured her attention across the room.

The screen on the workbench at the back of the medical unit was split into four panes. Two of them displayed spirals built of small coloured spheres, lazily rotating around their central axes. Beside each of these, in the other two panes, images of similar spirals flashed by at phenomenal speed, each snapshot an almost subliminal image. The blurred exchange of images gave the impression of an animated, constantly morphing shape.

Denson, wearing a white coat over his overalls, was pushing a slide under a small microscope at the main

workbench. 'DNA pattern matching,' he said without looking up.

Benny peered closer, uncomfortably aware of Joseph hovering on the periphery of her vision. He seemed to have taken to following her around. Still, she thought, at least he hadn't insisted on tidying her room. Not yet. 'From the bodies?' she asked.

'That's right.' Denson looked up from the microscope. 'I'm checking them against the records of the Colloquian University. Mikelz was a lecturer there, apparently.'

'Yes, he was.'

They both watched the flickering display on the screen for a short time. 'How long will it take?' Benny asked.

'There are several hundred thousand records from over the years. The index key's been lost, so we have to check every one. The name of the individual is watermarked into the DNA model, luckily, so when we get a match we can confirm who it is. But, sadly, we can't just look up Mikelz and check he's the male body.'

'And that's assuming it finds a match.'

'Exactly. I'd say at least a day. Maybe.'

Benny nodded. 'Thank goodness the days are quite short here,' she said.

They had settled into a routine of working on the site for the daytime, which was just over six hours of sunlight. For the equally short night, they ate, talked over what they had found and examined the new data. Then they went outside again at dawn and worked for the next day. The second night, they slept. Six hours was enough for each of them, they were on such an excited high from their discoveries.

It was during the second night, while everyone else was she believed asleep, that Emilia Winston decided to lay her ghosts to rest once and for all. She had lain awake, thinking about Jason and Benny, thinking about herself, until she could bear it no longer. She was not tired, but full of nervous energy and excitement. There was no way she could sleep,

and at her age she needed precious little rest anyway. There would be rest enough before long, she reckoned.

She pulled on her overalls, then a jacket against the cold of the night. She could see her breath, a faint mist in the near-darkness, as she made her way up to the temple. The Oracle seemed almost to glow in the dark, as if it attracted more than its fair share of the pale starlight. Winston could see the eyes of the statue watching her as she slowly approached it. Daring her to ask the question.

‘Can I ask you something?’ she said when she was close to the figure’s massive feet.

‘Of course. Why else would we be here, now?’

Winston paused, phrasing the question in her mind. ‘Oh, how shall I put this?’ she murmured.

‘I see the words in your mind’s eye,’ the Oracle said at once. ‘You wish to know about love. About love that is cold and lost. About love long-forgotten, long-forgiven. You ask if it can be rekindled, can shine again in the darkness of the heart.’

‘Yes,’ Winston breathed. ‘Yes, I do. Can you tell me? Please?’

‘I can.’ The light seemed to glisten on the Oracle’s face as she turned slightly, looking down at the woman. ‘Once lost, a thing so precious cannot be found again.’

‘Oh.’ Winston turned slowly to go, looking down at the ground, her head sagging in a parody of the Oracle’s pose.

‘Look rather for a replacement. Search not for what you have had, but for that you do not yet know. Recognize your future and let go what is past.’

The woman looked old now, old and tired as she turned back for a few seconds. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured. Then she turned and shuffled quietly away.

Braxiatel watched the woman’s slow progress back to the survey base. Only when she had gone inside and the door was closed behind her did he step out from behind the pillar and into the starlight. He looked up at the Oracle, tilting his head to one side as he said quietly: ‘I know you only reply to

questions, but you may if you wish speak with me. There are times when rules can be broken, or at least bent.'

There was silence for a few moments. Then the Oracle said: 'Thank you, my old friend. It is good of you to come.'

'Not at all.' Braxiatel settled himself down on the cold flagstone floor in front of the statue, crossing his legs beneath him. 'Let us sit upon the ground,' he said, 'and tell sad stories of the death of friends.'

FINALE

Benny was on her feet now, bracing herself, feet apart. She could feel the tension on the trigger, feel it slightly slippery under her moist finger. It was difficult to keep the gun aimed, angled back towards her like this. But she held it steady, pointed it right between her eyes, blotting everything from her thoughts except the gun.

POST-MORTEM

Breakfast was modest and quiet. Benny stumbled in, still wiping the sleep from her eyes and wondering how she could possibly have a hangover after just a couple of glasses of wine the previous evening - even if that was only about seven hours ago. Everyone else was already there, apart from Denson.

Braxiatel was sitting apart from the others, sipping tea from a china cup. Clarence was talking quietly with Garshal. The two of them seemed to have built up a friendship. Follett was sitting alone in his cloud of pale green steam, lost in thought. Winston looked tired as she helped herself to a refill of black coffee.

Jason too looked worn and weary as he pulled a chair out for Benny. 'Thanks,' she mumbled as she slumped down in it. He put a coffee close to her hand and sat beside her.

Denson rushed into the room, wide-eyed and excited and Benny's head reeled at how awake he seemed in contrast to everyone else.

'I've got a match,' he said eagerly.

'Great,' Jason said. 'Light us a fire and we'll all huddle round and tell ghost stories.'

Denson ignored him. 'It's not Mikelz,' he said, almost breathless.

This penetrated the fug of Benny's mind. 'Not... Then who is it?'

The others were crowding round now, sensing this was perhaps important.

'The woman is Mikelz's wife all right. Louisa Mikelz. But the man was some guy called Gregor.' He looked round at them all. 'Anyone heard of him?'

'He was Mikelz's assistant,' Follett said. 'His star pupil, and later his colleague.'

‘The three of them came here together,’ Benny said. ‘So what happened to Mikelz?’

‘He killed them and then left,’ Garshal said.

‘If that was the case, then where did he go?’ Winston was asking.

‘Why would he kill them?’ Clarence asked at the same moment. ‘His own wife...’

‘And his friend,’ Braxiatel said. He shrugged. ‘His two closest friends, except perhaps for Watkinson.’

Benny thought about this. ‘Watkinson disappeared about the same time,’ she said slowly.

‘Is that significant?’ Denson asked her.

She shrugged. ‘Who can say? Maybe they went off together somewhere. We don’t know that Mikelz killed them. Anything could have happened.’

For several minutes they discussed the possibilities. But nobody had a theory that seemed at all satisfactory.

‘We should examine Mikelz’s base in more detail,’ Follett said. ‘So far we have neglected it in favour of the temple.’

‘And rightly so,’ Braxiatel said. ‘It’s a side issue, albeit an intriguing one I admit.’

‘We can’t divert too much resource away from the temple,’ Winston agreed.

‘Perhaps, then, I could suggest that I spend some time looking through Mikelz’s base,’ Follett said. ‘The rest of you can continue with your work, and I shall return to help as soon as I’ve made a quick re-examination. If I find anything that seems significant, we can decide then what if anything to do about it.’

Benny cut in before anyone else could answer. ‘That seems like an excellent proposal to me,’ she said. ‘Any objections?’

There were none.

Standing in the middle of the living area of Mikelz’s base, Follett realized how much he had missed real archaeology. Running a department was all very well, in fact it was his dream come true. But it was, he had to admit, no substitute for the real thing. Even the relatively recent remains he was

looking at held a fascination, had stories to tell. Actually finding, handling, cataloguing and documenting artefacts - people, places, things... That was what it was really about. Watkinson had talked about the importance of context. Follett knew that he had been right. You had to get so close you could taste the past, be so in tune with it that in your imagination you were there.

He had already recorded everything in detail. Now it was time to start exploring. The emergence of the strange deities on Dellah and the subsequent destruction of the university - of his Archaeology Department - in the resulting religious fervour had in some ways been a good thing, Follett decided. At least, for himself. It had given him the chance to get back to what he now realized he enjoyed most. It was not about haggling for funding, or balancing the accounts, or appointing academics who wouldn't know a trowel let alone a graduometer if they were hit on the head with one. It was about discovery. It was about discovering things about the present and the future by uncovering and unravelling the mysteries of the past.

The process was systematic and thorough. Follett started at the door and worked his way round the room. He opened cupboards and drawers, recording what was inside before he looked through it. Most things were personal effects or standard materials and artefacts. The sort of equipment one would expect a poorly prepared expedition to have cobbled together, from specimen jars to friction-strip firelighters. Nothing especially interesting. But that was fine. Things would get more intriguing as he moved on to the private quarters.

He decided to start in Mikelz's room. That was the most likely to yield tangible results. There was a computer on the desk and Follett switched it on. As he had expected, nothing happened. No power, and probably the thing was clogged with dust and sand. He could remove the storage system later and see if it held anything that could be retrieved.

But the filing cabinet under the desk proved more useful. Follett forced the lock; it did not take much effort since it

was corroded and intended only to deter opportunists. The cabinet was stuffed with files. It seemed that Mikelz was one of those, like Watkinson, who preferred to keep a printed copy of things. He leafed through the papers quickly, discarding most as boring or standard. Requests for funding, invoices for equipment, lists of names and e-addresses of colleagues and friends.

Then he came across a file labelled simply *Watkinson*. He opened it and pulled out the few printed sheets inside. The first few he recognized as the Mikelz-Watkinson message reprinted in *Living Archaeology*. He dropped it back into the folder and turned his attention to the next document.

The sound of the door opening barely registered as he read through the printed paper. It was only when a shadow fell across the page that Follett realized he was not alone in the room. He glanced up, eager to share his discovery at once.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘It’s you.’

Garshal had been working with Benny, digging carefully into one of the mounds of sand left by the blowers. Some of them were dotted about the floor of the temple because the sand had solidified and resisted the attentions of the blowers. Others were areas deliberately left since the geophysical data suggested there was something there, raised from the floor, which they had not wanted to disturb. So far they had uncovered a few more coins like the one Benny had made into a medallion for Jason, but little else. It was early yet.

Garshal was using a hand-held ground-penetrating radar device to scan each mound before Benny dug into it. That way they could determine what it might contain, and whether just to remove the sand and dirt, or to scrape it carefully away layer by painstaking layer.

Benny and Garshal both looked at the readings from the latest sweep. Neither of them was sure what they meant.

‘I’d ask Follett,’ Benny said. ‘He’s got more experience of this stuff than I have.’ She looked round, then remembered. ‘He’s down at Mikelz’s base.’ She pulled a small comms-unit from her pocket and keyed in Follett’s frequency. ‘He’s not

answering,' she said after letting it call for a while. 'Probably too engrossed.' She grinned at Garshal. 'You know what these archaeologists are like when they get their teeth into something.'

'I will take the readings to him and ask his opinion,' Garshal offered.

'Would you? Thanks.' She made a swatting motion above her head. 'Take Joseph with you, will you? Go on, you're driving me batty, buzzing round like that.'

'My apologies, madam,' Joseph fussed. 'I had no intention of giving cause for annoyance, I am here merely to offer my services...'

'Yes, well go with Garshal and offer them to Dr Follett, would you?' Benny pointed to a nearby mound they had scanned previously. 'I'll make a start over there in the meantime. Then we can decide what to do about this one.'

Jason joined her as she was lifting a shard of ceramic from the sand. 'Anything interesting?'

'Not really. A few broken pots, the staple fare of archaeologists the universe over.'

'You expected more?'

Benny wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Her head was throbbing. 'Not really. It's obvious that this wasn't somewhere that people actually lived. The Delfans just dropped by Delfus-Orestes to ask the Oracle the odd question, then zoomed off home again. The trappings of that ritual are all we shall find, I think.'

'And Mikelz, maybe,' Jason said.

'Maybe.' Benny stood up and dusted herself down. In the distance, below them, she could see Garshal entering the survey base. It was too far for her to make out Joseph bobbing near by. 'You know,' she said, 'there's something unnervingly recursive about digging up the remains of dead archaeologists.'

As she finished speaking, Garshal emerged from the building below. He was running. And ahead of him, clearly visible and getting bigger every second as it raced urgently up towards her, was the billiard-ball shape of Joseph.

There was a sombre atmosphere as they all congregated in the living area of the base. Garshal had carried the body to the medical unit, where Denson and Braxiatel were examining it.

‘Was he very old?’ Clarence asked quietly.

Winston was sitting, shivering. Her hands were wrapped round a mug of coffee. She shook her head. ‘Not by his standards,’ she said through near-chattering teeth.

Benny sat beside her, resting her hand gently on the woman’s shoulder. Garshal stood silently by the door. Jason was pacing round the room, looking at the floor. Only Wolsey seemed not to be bothered by events. The cat leapt up on to a table with a single bound, licking at a splash of spilt cream beside the coffee pot.

‘Careful,’ Jason said, edging Wolsey aside. ‘That’s hot.’ The cat hissed at him, baring its sharp teeth. Then it leapt down to the floor and ran from the room.

They all looked up as Denson came in. He was rubbing his hands together nervously, his face grave. Behind him, Braxiatel stood unusually quiet as the older man spoke. ‘I’ve done a quick, very cursory post-mortem,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know much about Dr Follett’s physiognomy, but with Braxiatel’s help here we’ve made some progress.’

‘We’ve frozen his body to be returned to the next of kin,’ Braxiatel added. ‘They can arrange whatever funeral is appropriate.’

Winston looked away.

‘How did he die?’ Garshal demanded. ‘Are we at risk from infection or violence?’

Denson sat down. His head slumped forward, his hands clasped on the table top. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I really don’t.’ He looked up, and Benny could see that he was drawn, his face almost grey. ‘I just don’t know enough about how his body should be working to say if this was natural causes or not.’ He glanced round at Braxiatel before adding, ‘And the state of the body does not make it easy to tell.’

‘What do you mean?’ Benny asked.

It was Braxiatel who answered. 'The body has been mummified,' he said.

What?'

'Doesn't that take an incredibly long time?' Jason said.

'Not necessarily,' Denson said. 'But it does take a while. Mummification is caused by the halting of the natural process of putrefaction. If he had been buried in the hot sand for a while, that would explain it.'

'But he hasn't,' Braxiatel said. 'So we don't know whether this is the result of some artificial means, or perhaps a natural process associated with his death.'

'I'm running some queries to try to get an answer to that,' Denson said.

Braxiatel sighed, shaking his head. 'The body is brittle, almost shrivelled inside his shell. Incredibly dry, brownish-black. The internal organs have shrunk, judging by the cavities they should occupy, to about half their original size.'

'Could this be a natural thing?' Jason asked. 'Putrefaction is to do with bacteria, isn't it? Maybe this place is pretty sterile.'

'Maybe. But there's still the time factor.' Braxiatel sat down next to Denson. 'Natural mummification used not to be uncommon in the case, say, of the concealed death of an infant. The baby's body was relatively free of bacteria, and the body was often hidden in a warm, dry place where circulating air could help the process of dehydration. But again, over a period of time.' He looked round at them. 'We all saw Follett this morning. We can't tell from the state of the body, but we know he hasn't been dead long.'

Emilia Winston stood up. She sniffed, wiped at her face with her handkerchief, and said: 'I want to see him.'

Benny went with her. The four of them - the two women, Denson and Braxiatel - almost filled the small medical area inside the cargo bay of the hopper. Denson knelt beside a large metal casket, unclipping a seal on the side.

'I had some medical supplies in this,' he said. 'They need to be kept frozen. So let's hope we don't need them.'

A cloud of steam rose from the casket as he opened the lid. For a brief moment, seeing him as usual through a swirling mist, Benny thought that Follett looked almost normal.

Lifelike. But the mist was white, not pale green. And as it thinned, she could see that the form inside the casket was shrivelled and dark. Where it was visible, the skin was parchment dry. There were thin lines across the body, scars from the incisions and cuts of the post-mortem examination. As Benny stared into the casket, Winston turned silently away.

Benny was also turning when something caught her eye. 'Did you examine his hands?' she asked.

Denson was surprised. 'No, not specifically.'

'Why?' asked Braxiatel.

'Because I think he's holding something.' She leant over the casket, was about to kneel beside it, but Denson gently pulled her away.

'Let me,' he said.

Slowly, carefully, he peeled open the fingers on the right hand. It was clenched into a tight fist, but it seemed to open easily. Sure enough, inside, screwed into a tight ball were several flimsy sheets of paper. Denson handed them to Benny without a word, and she uncreased them on the table, opening them out in the same careful way as Denson had opened Follett's dead fingers.

The paper was ragged, the top torn off the first sheet. There were two sheets, and the printed words finished in mid-sentence at the bottom of the second.

'You know what this is?' Benny said quietly, hardly daring to breathe. Her finger was tracing the words of the message ident and address at the foot of the first page.

Braxiatel was leaning over her shoulder, reading along with her. 'It's Mikelz's second message to Watkinson,' he said.

MIHELZ'S SECOND MESSAGE TO WATHINSON (*FRAGMENT*)

...almost consumed with worry. For three whole days the Oracle refused to be drawn on the subject, or to answer any other questions relating to the matter. 'What I have spoken, I have spoken,' she repeated in answer to my endless inquisition.

I neglected almost everything. Gregor and Louisa did not question me on what I do in the Oracle Chamber. They know from the experience of the last few days that I shall not be drawn on the matter. And they have more than enough work to keep themselves busy.

I was hardly aware of it during that time, though now I replay the evidence in my mind's eye at every opportunity, but as the days drew on, so Louisa seemed more and more accustomed to my absence from her company. I had seen how she was content in the company of Gregor as they worked together, ate together, talked together. I confess, I was glad that she was not bored, that she had found a friendship that might compensate in some small part for my forced absence.

I turned my whole attention to solving the riddle of the Oracle, to determining how I could discover the details behind her words. Who would I kill? And why? I could think of nothing more like anathema to my being, to my whole philosophy, than the wilful taking of a life. Except perhaps the deliberate destruction of the Oracle herself. Yet both these heinous crimes she has accused me of, before the fact.

Then it occurred to me that I must vary the manner of my questioning; rather than couching the same question in different terms I should try circumspection. So I determined to ask the same thing but with different questions. On that fourth day, I spoke with the Oracle again.

My first question was: 'When shall I die?' For I knew that if by some terrible circumstance I were to take life, I should not be able to live long with the knowledge of that deed.

Again, the Oracle's reply was far from straightforward. 'After all others here are also dead,' she said in those honey-melodious tones.

'You mean, I shall die here on Delfus-Orestes?' I asked, surprised at the response.

'Delfus-Orestes has been a grave to many people,' the Oracle said. 'And it will serve as mausoleum again in the future.'

'Are you saying that one of those people will be killed by me?' I demanded. 'Murdered by my hand?'

And then the Oracle told me what my crime was to be. Oh, not in simple terms, not explicitly. But she said: 'On Delfus-Orestes you will destroy that which you most love, Oleg Mikelz.'

I must confess that my mind was not able to assimilate this at once. My first thought was that she referred again to her foretelling of my destruction, or attempted destruction, of herself. But as I stood there, as I thought back over the events of the last few days and weeks and the change in my fortunes and my temperament, another idea occurred to me. For there is another I love more than the Oracle, despite the fact that I have neglected her, have all but abandoned her these last days.

Louisa.

'My wife,' I spluttered. 'Are you saying I shall kill my own wife, my darling Louisa?'

The Oracle did not reply to the question, saying only: 'I have spoken.' But there was a dullness to her words, her tone. And there was, I am sure, a hint of deep sadness in her eyes that confirmed for me at once that this was indeed her meaning. And I confess that I laughed out loud at the ridiculous idea. Now I knew that she was mistaken, and with a lighter heart and conscience I left her.

I went in search of Louisa, of course. You may guess the mixture of emotions coursing through my mind as I hunted

her out on the western edge of the site. I struggled to think of what circumstance might indeed compel me to murder her. I thought perhaps of an unfortunate accident to which I was somehow party. But the Oracle's description of the deed as a murder had been explicit, unambiguous. I could not countenance the deed, I decided as I saw my love in the distance, stooping to scrape away at the edge of a pillar she and Gregor had been uncovering. Even, I was sure, the discovery that she was suffering from some incurable illness that would take her painfully from me would not be sufficient to bring about the prophecy.

I was close to her, within earshot, and still she had not seen me. I was about to call out, to tell her how I loved her, how I would be there for her always, when another thought edged unbidden into my mind. A suspicion, no more, that there was one circumstance which might anger me to the point where an act of violence against my love was just possible. And I stood a moment, struck by the thought, recalling the laughter and good humour and camaraderie of the last few days that I had observed but not been a party to.

At which moment, Gregor appeared on the other side of Louisa, holding up a shard of a pot or vase that he had discovered. He was speaking, though my mind was in a fog and I did not hear the words. But I saw Louisa throw back her head and laugh. I heard the humour, the joy in that sound. I saw the rapture on her face, the shared achievement as she took the fragment of pottery from Gregor and together, heads close, they bent to examine it.

Then she looked up, as if alerted by a sound, or a sudden awareness that they were not alone, and saw me. And for a split second, the briefest moment, I saw something in her eyes. Was it surprise? Or guilt?

Then, as suddenly, it was gone. And she was all smiles and warm greeting as Gregor stood deferentially aside, a hint of amusement on his face.

Now, as I write to you, my old Mend, I replay in my mind yet again the events and words I barely noticed, the way in which Louisa and Gregor...

Fragment ends.

HEAT SEEKING

Garshal was the expert. They all crowded round the console in his room, barely managing to squeeze into the confined space. It took him only a few minutes to set things up.

‘What will this show us?’ Winston wanted to know.

‘I have set the satellites to track heat patterns,’ Garshal explained. ‘It is almost night; body heat, even my own low body heat, will show up distinctly.’

‘Except in buildings, or underground,’ Braxiatel added. ‘But it will tell us if there is any life out there on the surface.’

‘Life that emits heat,’ Denson said.

The image was mainly dark. Surface detail was barely visible and Garshal laid a grid over the picture, the coordinates showing what they were looking at.

‘What’s that?’ Benny pointed to an area of fuzzy orange, a large glowing mass in the middle of the screen.

‘That is us. This base.’

‘Oh. Right.’

They looked at the image for a while as Garshal ran checks on the other satellites, searching to see if any of them had detected a heat trace.

‘If that’s us here...’ Benny said after a while.

‘Yes?’ Denson said.

‘Then that -’ she tapped at a small red area close by ‘- is heading our way.’

They all leant towards the screen. Sure enough, the red blob was rolling slowly but inexorably towards the base.

‘I brought some handguns,’ Denson said slowly. ‘In case of predators, wild animals...’ He let the question hang. The blob rolled closer.

‘What is it?’ Winston asked, the tension apparent in her voice.

'It is small,' Garshal said, checking the readings. 'A life form about so big.' He demonstrated, holding his hands apart to show them.

'Of course.' Benny almost laughed. 'I bet I know what it is. Hang on, I'll check.' Before anyone could stop her, she ran from the room. Joseph was hovering in the corridor near by and she ducked instinctively as she passed by him. A moment later she was at the main door. You had better be right about this, she thought as she threw the door open. The chill of the night swept in. And close behind it, meowing softly, came Wolsey.

Behind her, Benny could hear the laughter of the others as they crowded round. But it was laughter of relief rather than amusement. And it died away as they remembered why they had been checking the satellite images.

Despite feeling exhausted, there was no way that Benny could sleep. She had, she realized, come to like as well as respect Divson Follett. It seemed incredible that here of all places, at the moment of the greatest find in his career - in any of their careers - he was gone. Suddenly, and unpredictably, he was dead.

She needed coffee, she decided. If she couldn't sleep then she might as well try to be awake enough to do something useful. Like write her diary, except that would mean going over events as she recorded them. Or read some more of Watkinson's biography. It was a massive book and so far she had made little progress. It was easier to skim through the interesting passages, dipping in and reading a few pages more or less at random. She pulled on jeans and T-shirt, deciding not to bother with socks or shoes.

The coffee in the pot in the living area was cold. So Benny padded barefoot along to the kitchenette to brew some fresh. The whole base seemed silent, the lighting dimmed for the 'night'. She had half expected to find several other people, also unable to sleep, drinking coffee in sullen silence. But there was nobody.

Which, perhaps, was why she was startled by the sound of a door opening. It came from one of the spine corridors, she could not tell which. She stood, coffee pot in hand, straining to hear footsteps. Nothing. She poured herself some coffee, added milk, and started back towards the living area at the central hub, wondering who she would find waiting.

But before she got there, she was aware of a cool breeze on her feet as they poked out of the end of her jeans. Almost immediately there was the sound of a door closing from up ahead. She was close enough to know that it was the outside door. Someone had gone outside.

Which was fine. A clear, cool night. Stars. Beautiful landscape and stunning temple ruins on show. Not a bad idea, in fact. And nothing much else to do but mope about.

She took her coffee with her, slipping out into the night and pushing the door shut behind her with her foot. She stood for a while, blowing out misty breath and sipping the scorching coffee. There was no sign of anyone else, though she was sure she had heard the door.

Then, in the distance, she saw a tiny figure as it climbed to the temple, standing upright as it arrived beside one of the huge pillars. She watched as it made its distant way over to the Oracle, standing in front of it, hands on hips in an almost defiant gesture. It was Jason. She could tell. Anyone else she might be guessing, or not sure. But she knew it was Jason.

He stood there for as long as it took Benny to drink her coffee. He was still there when she had finished. She thought she could hear the Oracle's voice, carried to her on the faint breeze at one point. But it might have been her imagination.

Realizing her mug was empty, Benny set it down on the ground at her feet and took a step forward. She would go up there and see what he was up to, she had decided.

But then she felt the cold night sand between her toes, looked up at the steep climb to the temple, felt the breeze tug at her thin shirt, and thought better of it.

Instead she turned and went inside.

* * *

It was another half-hour before Jason returned. He was carrying a coffee mug as he entered the living area, and Benny thought at first he had taken a drink with him. Then she realized it was the mug she had herself left outside the door, stuck at an angle in the soft sand.

‘I found this,’ Jason said in apparent surprise. ‘Late-twenty-sixth century, some sort of plastic compound.’ He tossed it across the room to her and Benny struggled to catch it. A thin dribble of dark liquid dripped from it as the mug curled in the air. ‘Is it valuable, do you think?’ he asked.

‘What were you doing out there?’ she demanded as she put the mug down on the table.

‘Thinking. Walking. Admiring the view.’ He cocked his head to one side. ‘Why?’

She shrugged.

‘And you?’ he asked.

‘Much the same. Couldn’t sleep.’

He smiled at her. ‘You should try,’ he said. ‘Need help getting off?’

‘No thanks.’ She tried to smile back, to show she appreciated the thought. But somehow the smile wouldn’t come. ‘You were talking to the Oracle, weren’t you?’

‘Ooh,’ he pouted. ‘The other woman. Jealous, are we?’

‘Weren’t you?’ she said again.

‘I...’ He waved his hands in the air, shrugged and paced up and down. All at once. ‘Does it matter?’

Benny swung round in the chair to watch him. ‘What did you ask her?’

He stopped and turned slowly towards her. His face was almost blank, expressionless. His mouth opened, then closed. ‘I asked her...’ he started. But his voice tailed off, a dying cadence.

Benny waited, said nothing.

‘I asked her nothing,’ he said as he left her there, alone with her thoughts.

By the time she got back to her room, Benny was wide awake and morning was only an hour away. She lay on her

bed, still in her jeans and T-shirt, hands laced behind her head, thinking about Jason. He was probably asking if some woman or other still respected him. Maybe he was even asking about herself. But she didn't care. Really, she didn't care. She didn't care so much that it was annoying her silly.

When she had finished being annoyed silly, she swung her feet off the bed and stood up. She hefted the book on to her desk and flipped through the pages idly. She needed to do something to keep her mind busy for an hour. She read again the message Mikelz had sent to Watkinson, seeing it now in the context of his second message. What had happened here, eighty years or more ago? The direction in which Mikelz's thoughts were moving was apparent from the message Follett had found. And the end result, if it was a direct result of that and not of something else, was evident from the bodies they had found. Louisa and Gregor. Shot dead. But where was Mikelz?

Come to that, she thought as she flipped through to the end of the book, where was Watkinson? There was a disturbing symmetry to all this. Dead archaeologists; the synchronicity of God's sending her a record of Watkinson's lecture after Mikelz left for Delfus-Orestes, and then Jason turning up to say he'd found the place; the disappearance of both Mikelz and Watkinson...

She could not discover anything more about Mikelz, but she could find out what there was to know about Watkinson. She thumbed through the pages, recalling the date of the second message. What was Watkinson doing when Mikelz sent him the message? Or had he already disappeared, upped and left, by then?

No, here it was. He was on an expedition with some students and colleagues. He was on a planet called Paracletes. Benny reached automatically for a glass of wine that wasn't there as she read quickly through the chapter on the Paracletes expedition. Her hand froze even before it realized it was reaching out into emptiness. Benny's blood seemed to freeze too. Words and phrases jumped out at her:

‘tragedy’, ‘only survivor’, ‘call for help’, ‘bodies’. She turned the page. What the hell had happened there?

The following page was taken up with a blurred reprint of an official report, offered by way of the only explanation.

REPORT OF CAPTAIN RIVA GORDENSHI,
DUTY OFFICER EXTRACTION UNIT FIVE,
CAVANORA SYSTEM -
11 SEPTEMBER, 2515 (EXTRACT)

My unit responded to the distress call as a matter of urgency given the code one priority (included as *Attachment 01*). We had been briefed that the archaeological expedition was on Paracletes, and that one Edward Watkinson had filed a full and proper itinerary. It is unusual to find an itinerary so detailed or so accurate.

Following Watkinson's coordinates and verifying the target area from the distress emission data, we proceeded to area 217, reference 45.22Nx93.71W with extreme speed. We exercised caution when landing, given the level of distress indicated and the lack of information about the exact threat encountered. We were also wary as Paracletes has been off-limits for so long.

Trooper Jinkel found the first of the bodies just outside the plexidome and it was designated Corpse 01 and logged. For a full list see *Attachment 03, List of Remains and Relative Positioning*. I should point out that we did not immediately log the corpse, and this has been the subject of verbal criticism during informal reports and communications. In defence of my team I would respectfully point out that we were aware that we were extracting an archaeological team from level one extremis, and the discovery of a body in such a state was not perceived as directly relevant to the mission in hand. Rather it was initially believed to be one of the artefacts or remains that was the subject of the archaeological work. Corpse 01 was formally identified from holo-snap by Professor Edward Watkinson during debriefing

as being Dr Alburt Kinaga (again, please see *Attachment 03* for details).

Proceeding with extreme caution, the team entered the dome, calling continually for survivors to advance, verbally identify, and be recognized. No survivors were forthcoming, so we continued our incursion.

As can be seen from comparing the list of deceased (*Attachment 03*) and the expedition's Crew Manifest (*Attachment 02*), Professor Watkinson proved to be the only survivor. From the transcript of his debriefing (accessible with level three clearance from the central register, document reference Janken 7/0034A. 1) it is clear that Watkinson had no explanation for the deaths of his colleagues or the state of the bodies. He was subsequently released from custody and Paracletes sealed off as an area of Extreme Bio-hazard.

A field post-mortem was conducted in sterile conditions on Corpse 04 (see *Attachment 09*). Corpse 04 was left on Paracletes, and no biological material other than live personnel was recovered, as per Directive 635, Bio-hazard Precautions Enactment, Cavanora System.

Braxiatel read through the reprinted document in the book slowly and carefully. 'Hmm,' he said when he had eventually finished, and handed *Living Archaeology* back to Benny.

'Is that it?' she said. 'Just *hmmm?*'

'What more do you expect?'

'Well, don't you see it?' she asked, waving the book, which given its weight was not an inconsiderable feat in itself.

'I see the report of another archaeological expedition that got into some sort of trouble.' He shrugged. 'You, Benny, more than most people ought to know that this is not a unique scenario.'

'But the similarities,' Benny protested. 'The links between Watkinson and Mikelz, between this expedition to Paracletes and our own...' She tried to stare him down, but failed. 'Don't you see it at all?'

Braxiatel said nothing. Instead, he stood up and crossed over to a small cupboard in the corner of his cramped room, and opened it up. Inside was a collection of bottles and glasses. A moment later he was handing Benny a glass of wine.

'Thanks,' she murmured. The liquid was cool, slightly oak-flavoured, and very dry.

'I'm not convinced,' Braxiatel said as he poured himself a glass of the wine, 'that there is anything to see.' He turned to face her. 'Truly I'm not. So an expedition had some sort of problem, Watkinson was by all accounts never the same again and soon after that he set off on his final journey to...' he waved his free arm in an all-encompassing arc, wherever.' He sat down opposite Benny at the small table. 'But that's it, I'm afraid. There are coincidences, maybe. But we can't tell from this,' he tapped the book, 'whether there's any more to it.'

Benny was blinking back tears of frustration. She riffled through the book until she found the right page. 'But look - it talks about "the state of the bodies",' she said, pointing to the words. 'And here it mentions the suspicion of a bio-hazard.'

In answer, Braxiatel ran his fingers through his hair and gave a short, mirthless laugh. 'So what does that mean? It doesn't say what state the bodies were in. Maybe they were burnt, or frozen, or mutilated, or knifed in the back with a knitting needle.'

'Or mummified.'

He nodded. 'I admit that could be the case. But we can't tell, not from this alone. They could have been in penguin fancy dress wearing yellow top hats from what this tells us.'

'And the bio-hazard?'

'Again could mean anything. In fact they say there wasn't one, so far as they could tell. It's a term to cover ignorance or incompetence. In this case I suspect ignorance.'

'We don't know what killed Follett,' Benny said emphatically. 'There is a link, I'm sure of it.'

'Then tell me how you are sure. At the moment we don't know for certain that there is anything to link Watkinson with the Oracle apart from a couple of letters from Mikelz. Let alone mysterious deaths. Give me more evidence than supposition and intuition. Something we can work with, build on. Research.'

Benny drained her wine and stood up abruptly. 'All right,' she said. 'I will.'

The only one she decided to trust was Clarence. Normally she might have considered Jason, but he had been so odd lately, so out of sorts, that she rejected the idea immediately. But Clarence was as dependable as the day was short.

'What are we looking for, exactly?' he asked as they entered Mikelz's base.

'If I knew, I might know where to begin,' Benny told him. 'My hunch is to start in the living quarters, in people's rooms. Follett was in Mikelz's room, and I imagine he had already been through this main living area.'

‘So whatever is left is likely to be in one of the others’ rooms.’

Benny nodded. ‘If there is anything.’

‘You aren’t sure?’

Benny sighed. ‘I’m not sure. But I know.’ She smiled at Clarence’s puzzled expression. ‘It’s a human thing, don’t worry.’ She led him through the main area and down towards the private rooms. ‘Or maybe it’s an archaeologist thing.’ She hesitated between the two closed doors beyond Mikelz’s room. ‘Or a woman thing,’ she murmured.

‘Shall we take one room each?’ Clarence asked as she continued to hesitate between them.

‘Good idea,’ Benny said. ‘Call me if you find anything that’s... odd.’

He nodded, still obviously nonplussed, then pushed open the nearest door and disappeared inside. Benny made for the other door. ‘Hell,’ she said out loud, ‘maybe it’s a Bernice Summerfield thing. Then we’re really buggered.’

It took her only a few minutes to realize she was in Gregor’s room. And a couple of minutes more to find his personal journal, his log of the expedition, under a sheen of dust in a drawer of his desk. It did not surprise her that so much was recorded on paper rather than storage devices. So soon after the wars there had been a shortage of reliable memory and storage. So paper was once again a cheap and reliable medium, and that was especially appealing to archaeologists, as she well knew.

But before she could look beyond the first page, there was a quiet knock at the door. Benny stuffed the notebook inside her jacket, suddenly aware just how alone she was, and that she was in the next room to where Follett had died. ‘Yes, who is it?’ she said nervously.

The door creaked slightly as it slowly swung open, revealing Clarence standing majestically in the opening. His wingtips were clearly visible over his shoulders as he looked down at the sheaf of papers in his hand.

‘Would letters written by Louisa Mikelz, letters that suggest she thinks her husband is behaving strangely, fall into your general category of “odd”?’ he asked.

Benny exhaled heavily and pulled the logbook from inside her jacket. ‘Are you as incredibly naive as you sometimes seem,’ she asked, ‘or have you finally begun to appreciate the impact and power of sarcasm?’

He didn’t answer, but stood in the doorway, his mouth slightly open as he considered this.

‘Never mind,’ Benny said. She relieved him of the papers as she pushed past. ‘Let’s get a proper look at these.’

GREGOR'S LOG (*EXTRACT*)

...second day now that he has not permitted us to enter the Oracle Chamber. What he does in there, I know not. And he is not one to confide in others, save possibly Louisa. But she tells me she is as worried as I about his reticence. Probably more so. Is his enthusiasm for the Oracle such that he is not able to think even of his own wife?

Or is it, as I was afraid, that they are intimidated to some degree by my presence here? I have been keenly aware on several occasions that I am 'in the way'. It cannot be easy for them, for Louisa in particular since I am practically a stranger so far as she is concerned.

So I have resolved myself to be a friend to her. If nothing else, it is my duty to Oleg to ensure his wife is well looked after while he is so preoccupied with other matters. If only he would let me help him with whatever he works on. But still he insists that I give my full attention to the extremities of the site. No doubt he has good reason, though I cannot fathom it.

Louisa too is becoming worried, I can tell. All that I can do is to try to alleviate her anxiety by spending time with her, distracting her, involving her in my work until such time as her husband is able once again to involve her in his own.

Area G7 is yielding more fragments than I had expected. Today, with Louisa's help, I have uncovered nine more pieces of floor and two complete tiles. From the fracture lines on several of the pieces, it would seem that a sudden heavy weight, presumably the overlying sand, was brought to bear. I cannot tell how this would have happened so suddenly, though one theory might be that a storm ...

Extract ends.

CORRESPONDENCE OF LOUISA MIHELZ (FRAGMENT)

...this obsession. It seems to me that the quest was so much more enthralling, so much more fulfilling than the discovery. Up until he found the inner chamber of the Oracle, my Oleg was so enthusiastic. But his enthusiasm never encroached on his love or his attention to me.

I do not pretend to understand a thousandth part of his fascination with this thing, though I share in some smaller portion. It would be impossible not to be caught up in it, such is the depth of his emotion.

But as I have told you so many times before, Oleg is a deeply emotional man. Passionate even. And this passion for his work, his life is a large part of my own attraction to him. To hear him enthuse about the subject, to listen as he holds me rapt with his words, with his love of it, is to be in heaven. I can ask for no more.

So this trip, to be together in this astonishing place, should be the culmination of our love. A high point rather than a nadir. The one reservation I had was that we should not be alone, that Gregor would be with us always. But in fact, that is now a blessing.

If only you were here too. Gregor shares some of my anxiety, I know. But I cannot talk to him as I could to you. Or as I could to Oleg, if he would listen.

But he does not. I rarely see him. Since he uncovered the Oracle, he spends so little time with us, always in the chamber, always with her. What have I done, or not done, that he shuns me? Is his passion now so selfish that he cannot share it, when before it was so selfless that it brimmed over enough for us both.

He is changed. And I can only hope and pray that my Oleg will return when he has completed whatever it is he has yet to do.

I do not know when I shall send this to you, but the writing
- the words - are comfort in themselves.

Later

I have him back at last. Or, I think I do. We were working at the western corner of our excavations earlier and Oleg came to join us. He has shown so little interest in what Gregor and I have uncovered for so many days (is it only three? It seems a lifetime), that I was astonished to see him. Gregor was showing me a potsherd he had unearthed when I saw Oleg approaching. For a second the sun was in my eyes and I could not be sure it was him, though there is nobody else here. Then he moved slightly and blocked the bright rays, and at last he was back. I pray that his inner journey, to wherever it was, is now over and we can continue as before.

Gregor has been a good friend these past few days, but again I find myself wishing he were not here, that Oleg and I were alone together. Is that such a terrible thought?

Fragment ends.

QUESTIONS

Benny read through Gregor's log first, skimming through most of it, pausing longer on passages towards the end. Then she swapped with Clarence and leafed through what there was of Louisa Mikelz's unfinished letter. The top page was missing, so she had no idea who it was intended for - friend, mother, sister? It didn't really matter. The content was clear enough, sad enough.

Benny's suspicions from Mikelz's message to Watkinson were born out by this new evidence. It was not that his friends had turned against him, it did not even seem that his wife was having an affair with Gregor, though given Mikelz's apparent neglect of her, it wouldn't have been surprising. Rather, Mikelz was losing it. For whatever reason, his obsession was boiling over into paranoia.

Except, of course, that this had happened eighty years ago. But finding the evidence, discovering about it all, had a similar effect to seeing a tragedy played out. It was like watching it all happen now, in the present. Benny found herself willing Mikelz to stop being such a fool, to see what was happening, to realize how his friends, his wife and colleague, were concerned for him rather than plotting against him.

But in the back of her mind, there were always the bodies.

'Do you think Mikelz killed them?' Clarence asked quietly as he handed Gregor's notebook to Benny.

She shrugged. They were sitting on the bed in Clarence's room. Not that he needed to sleep. Or, at least, she didn't think he did. She wondered vaguely what he did at night.

Perhaps he wandered up to talk to the Oracle, like Jason.

Clarence stood up. There was a small light winking on the console on his desk. A message. He busied himself with the device while Benny flicked through the notebook again, but

she wasn't reading it. Just staring at the handwritten pages. Thinking of her own diary. If someone found her account of this expedition in about a hundred years' time, how much would they really learn from it? How accurate were her own impressions? How close to reality were they once she had filtered those inaccurate impressions and recorded them? Already that was two layers removed from the objective truth, even before she made deliberate alterations, embellishments, omissions.

'A message,' Clarence was saying. 'From B-Aaron.' He was scrolling rapidly through the text as he spoke. 'You should read this, Benny.'

She stood up, pushing the notebook and letters into her jacket pocket.

'He's sent you a copy too,' Clarence said, still not looking away from the screen.

'I'll read it in my room.' She was feeling down, as if the ghost of Louisa Mikelz had stolen her enthusiasm and her optimism.

Clarence nodded. He was still intent on the screen, and Benny let herself out of the room.

To get to her own room, she had to go back to the main living area - the hub - then down the spine corridor that led to her own quarters. Garshal and Jason were sitting in the living area. Jason was drinking coffee. Garshal was telling some war story involving honour, glory and death. She only caught a few words.

She needed some air, Benny decided. She would read the message later. Right now there was enough going on in her head without B-Aaron's help. Before she knew it, Benny found herself outside, walking up the incline towards the temple. As the slope grew steeper she started to climb, still not really knowing where she was going or why. Her mind kept coming back to the fact that she was convinced that whatever had happened to Watkinson on Paracletes was somehow related to Follett's recent death, and to Mikelz's disappearance all those years ago. She could appreciate

Braxiatel's point of view, but she was sure she was right. She just needed more information.

Then it occurred to her that the Oracle was as good a source of information as she was likely to find anywhere. And she found that she had reached the edge of the temple, was standing between two of the pillars - one upright, jutting upward into nothing, the other on its side, broken and shattered midway along its curtailed length.

She put it down to imagination, but it seemed as though the Oracle was watching her as she approached. The evening was drawing in quickly, the distant sun sinking over the horizon behind Benny, so that her shadow stretched out ahead of her, striding towards the Oracle.

'It's funny,' Benny said as she approached, 'but I'd have thought people would spend more time asking you questions, if you really can predict the future.'

The Oracle did not answer. But the eyes were alive with an inner intensity now, watching Benny as she stood at the statue's feet and stared up at it.

'Why is that?' Benny asked. 'Are we afraid to ask questions about the future?'

The Oracle's head tilted forward slightly as she answered. 'It is not the questions that people fear,' she said. 'It is the answers. It is the future itself, Bernice Summerfield.'

'Ah,' Benny said. 'The old I-know-your-name trick again. Very good. Very impressive. You know who we all are, I suppose?'

'I do.'

'And our futures?'

There was a slight pause, a hesitation, then the statue replied: 'Those who have futures. Yes.'

Benny frowned. 'You knew Follett was going to die, didn't you?'

'What I have spoken, I have spoken.'

'Yes, I've heard that before too.' Benny was thinking back, trying to recall what the Oracle had said to Follett that first day. 'Did you kill Follett?' she asked suddenly. 'Is that it?'

The answer was surprisingly short, both in length and tone. 'No,' the Oracle said severely.

'And how do I know you aren't lying?'

'I cannot lie.' The musical innocence was back in the words now.

'And how do I know that?'

The Oracle seemed to lean slightly forward on her chair, as if examining Benny, who shifted slightly, uncomfortable in the harsh gaze. 'That is a question you must answer, Bernice Summerfield, not I,' the Oracle said. 'But ask yourself, what need would I have of cryptic replies, of obfuscation, of indirection, if I could merely lie to protect myself and the future?'

Benny thought about this. She still wasn't convinced, but there was a sort of logic behind it. 'And what about the future, then?' she asked. 'I need some information. It doesn't matter what for now, but shall I find it?'

There was a longer pause now. And when the Oracle spoke, the voice seemed slightly distant, quieter, with a tinge of sadness. 'You ask about the future, Bernice, but it is a future you do not have.'

Benny laughed in surprise. A short, sharp snort of worried puzzlement. 'What?' She looked round, as if she could find an answer to the riddle from the surroundings, from the temple itself rather than from the Oracle.

'What I have spoken, I have spoken.'

But Benny did not hear this. She was staring at the figure just visible in the growing darkness, the figure leaning on one of the pillars off to the side of the temple. And she was wondering how long Braxiatel had been standing there. She did not know if he could tell she had seen him, but he stepped out of the shadows and walked towards her. She waited until he was close enough to touch, close enough to reach out and slap if need be. Then she said: 'What are you doing here? I didn't think eavesdropping was your sort of thing.'

'You'd be surprised,' he said quietly. 'But I think we may have more important things to worry about.' Before she could

protest further, he turned to the Oracle. 'What do you mean, a future she does not have?' he demanded.

'What I have spoken, I have -'

'Don't give me that,' he snapped before she had finished.

'It's just one of its cryptic riddles,' Benny said. 'Just a silly word game.' But there was a small part of her brain already that was shouting to know more.

'I don't think so. Is it?'

The Oracle did not reply. It took a moment for Benny to realize that it was refusing to answer a direct question.

'You do realize,' Braxiatel said, more quietly now, 'that not answering the question is itself an answer?'

'I do.'

He shook his head slowly. 'So we have to play games, do we? You won't answer that question so we have to find a form of words that you will answer.'

'Do not confuse won't and can't, will and can.'

'Then help us.'

Benny thought she followed this. 'Are we all going to die here?' she asked. 'Like Follett?'

'There will be others like Divson Follett,' the Oracle agreed. 'But you are not among them.'

'Then what are you saying?' Benny asked. She was worried now, could feel the prickling of sweat on her back.

'All things come to an end.'

Braxiatel put his hand on Benny's shoulder. 'It's probably nothing. Like you said, just a form of words. But let's try another approach.'

She nodded. Something in Braxiatel's tone, in his quiet reasonable words, was more worrying than the Oracle's unhelpful replies. 'OK. Whatever.'

'If someone who knows the future,' Braxiatel said slowly, 'tells a person who does not that they have no future, what might that mean, hypothetically speaking of course?'

There was a sound like a great sigh. Then the Oracle said, 'There are many possibilities. I can offer you one, as an example.' Her head turned slowly until she was looking

directly at Benny, eyes staring at her. And in their depths, Benny thought she could detect a flicker of light. 'If the person's days are numbered. If the illness within them grows.

If the affliction within the brain has reached the point of no turning back. If there is no treatment. If the undoing is already done and the end is hastening ever quicker. If death dogs your footsteps and waits in the shadows of your mind.' There was a pause, then the Oracle's final words came out in a sudden rush, as if propelled by an inner, concealed emotion, as if she wanted them out before her voice gave away her feelings. 'Thus-have-I-spoken.'

In his room, Clarence sat at the desk. He read through B-Aaron's message for the fourth time and wondered where Benny was. He had been sure she would be back as soon as she had read it. As soon as she saw what was in it.

When he finished rereading the words, Clarence switched off the console. He did not understand the woman, that much he knew. If she chose to wait, to play things out, then that was her decision. He would take his cue from her, wait to see how she wanted to handle this information. Probably she knew all about it, had things well in hand.

In his bio-mechanical mind, Clarence played through again the things that B-Aaron had discovered on the Worldsphere, wondering at the possible interpretations.

Afterwards, Benny did not remember the climb back down from the temple, or the short walk to the base. The first thing she recalled was walking into her room, Braxiatel holding the door open for her.

Joseph was hovering over the console on her desk, and bobbed in surprise as they came in. 'Professor Summerfield,' he whined, 'I was just filing your messages.' Text scrolled by on the screen behind him, but Benny did not notice as she slumped down on the bed.

'Out,' Braxiatel said simply.

'Sorry, sir?' The screen blacked out and Joseph spun round in agitation.

‘Get out,’ Braxiatel said through gritted teeth. ‘Now.’

‘Yes, sir. Of course, sir.’ The small white sphere flew close by his ear as it left the room. Then Braxiatel slowly, quietly, shut the door after it.

‘She isn’t always right, you know,’ he said quietly. ‘About the future.’

‘She was right about Follett, wasn’t she?’ Benny’s words were muffled. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning forward, her hands over her face.

‘That is one way of interpreting her answer to him. There are others.’

‘She was pretty clear just now.’

‘She *seemed* pretty clear. But that’s just our initial interpretation. There are others, I’m sure.’

Benny’s hands slipped down her face, wiping the tears away as they went. ‘Give me three,’ she said.

MERELY PLAYERS

B-Aaron had used a real-time interface. Not for any reasons of efficiency, or even a personal preference. Communicating with another AI was possible at incredible speed. But the last thing he wanted was for God or anyone else to get suspicious. So, conversing in real-time, keeping it low key, making it seem like a chat rather than an interrogation was a way of eliciting information as well as not showing up as a peak of comms activity that the log-watchers might pick up on. Far better if it looked like Zeb'Lan had just been visited by his old friend B-Aaron for a few minutes' casual conversation.

Of course, B-Aaron had rarely spoken to the simulation systems supervisor before. But at least they were acquainted. So it wasn't an entirely implausible scenario. If B-Aaron had not wanted to keep Zeb'Lan from realizing what he was really after, he could have asked the AI to run a simulation to find out just how implausible it really was. But he was not sure he wanted to know the answer.

Luckily, since Zeb'Lan spent most of its time running simulations of other people and intelligences, he was always more than happy to talk. In fact, the reason why so few people actually did drop by for a chat was because he talked so much. Something to do with having such an introspective job, probably. Albeit introspecting on others rather than itself.

Zeb'Lan was realized in real-space as a huge open-air amphitheatre on the top of a cliff. The simulations took place on the stage, of course, against a backdrop of sea and sky. If there were multiple simulations, then there were multiple stages. Or they were phase-shifted to run together and Zeb'Lan allocated a portion of his consciousness to each of them. This created a shimmer effect that would drive a

normal Person or even a Ship crazy, but reverse-slicing the output and reassembling it was simple enough for God. And He was usually the only audience.

‘Just thought I’d stop by and see how you are,’ B-Aaron said, hoping this didn’t sound too improbable. He just had to hope that Zeb’Lan had not run a simulation of him recently. Or ever, come to that. B-Aaron’s drone hovered above the third row of stone steps that served as seats.

On the stage, a man and a woman were arguing. The man was tall, his hair an unruly mess of light brown. He was wearing combat fatigues and well-worn boots and his skin was tanned. B-Aaron knew the woman. She was almost as tall, wearing long khaki shorts and a heavy shirt of similar material. A tie was loosely round her neck and her dark hair was cut short. Her face seemed to be set in an expression that mixed surprise, outrage and humour. It was Benny.

‘B-Aaron, long time no see.’ A large, round-shouldered man seemed to have grown up out of the next seat to greet the ship. ‘Excuse me just a moment, won’t you.’ The man lifted a hollow metal cone to his mouth and shouted down to the figure on the stage. ‘Very good, you two. Just hold it there a minute, will you?’ He lowered the primitive megaphone and turned to face B-Aaron. ‘Sorry about that. I think God wants to be sure he did the right thing. I’ve run more sims of these two arguing than I care to think of.’

‘What do they argue about?’

‘Everything. But it always ends the same way. Well,’ the man that was really Zeb’Lan conceded, ‘ninety-three per cent of the time anyway.’

B-Aaron considered. He had an opening gambit here, provided he didn’t blow it by getting too enthusiastic too soon. ‘Keeping you busy then,’ he hazarded.

‘Oh yes.’ Zeb’Lan gestured to the stage. ‘I used to do a lot with her, a while back. But I think God’s got her pretty well sussed now. Just a few terminal scenarios, coping with stress, that sort of thing. But the guy...’ Zeb’Lan shook his head. ‘Quietened down now. But he used to sit and watch for days on end. Watched them both, but especially himself.’

‘Himself?’ B-Aaron was confused now. Syntax and grammar were such clumsy tools for communication. It made you wonder how organic life had ever got out of the sludge sometimes. ‘You mean God simulated God?’

‘No, no. The man was here. Guest of God, best china, clean sheets, the lot.’

‘And he watched himself? Simulations?’

‘Endlessly. Sometimes here, usually up at the house. Narcissism at its most extreme if you ask me. He stayed for a while. A few weeks. Ran sims almost every day.’ Zeb’Lan pouted suddenly. ‘Wasn’t very talkative.’ He raised the megaphone again. ‘OK, you two,’ he shouted. ‘Let’s call it a day for now.’

On the stage the figures faded away.

‘Perhaps it’s to do with the war,’ B-Aaron said.

‘Perhaps,’ Zeb’Lan agreed. ‘But we don’t talk about that.’ He turned back to the stage. ‘Next!’

‘You’re not doing military sims, then?’

On the stage another figure was fading into existence. A tall, thin man wearing a light grey suit. He bowed stiffly.

‘All the time,’ Zeb’Lan said. He raised his eyes towards the sky. ‘Up there. Got a pretty complicated battle going on now. Trouble is mapping in the extra dimensions. Having things destroyed before they exist, coming back again after they’re dead. Nightmare.’

‘Let’s hope it never happens then.’

Zeb’Lan sighed. ‘Better than this guy though. I keep plugging away at him. Same data, same inputs. But he just won’t behave.’

B-Aaron’s drone zoomed its vision sensors in on the figure on the stage, just to be sure. The man was tapping his foot and looked bored. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, if you run the same sim with the same input data you expect the same result. It’s by varying the inputs, changing the parameters that you get the variation, explore the possibilities.’

‘So?’

‘So this guy behaves differently every time. No matter what. It’s like the model is so complex in and of itself that he’s intrinsically impossible to predict.’

As if to underline Zeb’Lan’s point, the figure on the stage shouted up at them: ‘Hurry up, will you. I don’t have all day.’

‘I mean, why did he do that?’ Zeb’Lan shook his head. ‘Free will is overrated if you ask me. Gets in the way.’

‘But the sims don’t have free will,’ B-Aaron pointed out.

‘I know. But tell him that.’ Zeb’Lan pointed back to the stage, where the man was shaking his head in annoyance. As they watched, he turned and walked off the stage, fading out of existence as he reached the edge of the circular dais.

‘Whatever made him do that?’ Zeb’Lan asked in apparent astonishment.

‘If it’s any consolation,’ B-Aaron said, ‘he’s like that in real life.’

‘Are you implying there might be a difference?’ Zeb’Lan asked slightly huffily.

‘Sorry.’

‘You know him, then?’

‘We’ve met,’ B-Aaron admitted. ‘His name’s Braxiatel.’

Zeb’Lan stood up and started down the steps towards the stage. B-Aaron followed, keeping pace. ‘How long was the other man here, did you say, the one we saw earlier?’

‘Couple of days the first time.’

‘The first time?’

Zeb’Lan sat down again, in the front row. ‘Another six to do today. Then all the calculations.’

‘I’m sorry,’ B-Aaron said, taking the hint. ‘I can tell you’re busy. I just fancied a chat.’

‘Oh, I appreciate it. Really I do. But, you know, deadlines, schedules, call sheets. The lot.’

B-Aaron bobbed an acknowledgement. ‘Good to see you, anyway.’ He started to float away. ‘You say he came back?’ he said, as if it were an afterthought. ‘Just to watch more of himself?’

‘That’s about the size of it. I thought I was well shot of him, but no. Play it again, Zeb. Just one more time, please. From the top. Never satisfied.’ Zeb’Lan turned away. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me.’

‘Sure.’ B-Aaron was almost out of the theatre now. ‘Oh, I know Benny of course. But who was that guy? The one who was actually here for so long. In the flesh. Watching himself.’

Zeb’Lan’s voice floated up from the front of the theatre, faint but not so quiet B-Aaron couldn’t hear the slight sneer.

‘Kane,’ he said. ‘Jason Kane.’

DIAGNOSIS

The machine gave a strangled beep and spat out a sliver of plastic. Hay ward Denson took the plastic strip and pushed it into the reader built into one of the screens on the table at the back of the medical unit.

This was the second time he had done this. The second time he had run exactly the same tests. 'Different, but complementary,' he had lied. He was as unwilling to accept the first set of results as he was to explain them. But the second set was identical, he saw as they flashed up on the screen.

Both screens now showed coloured schematic patterns, spinning slowly. They were at different points of rotation, but he could see that the colours were an exact match. He could see the dark mass of the disorder at the edge of the left lobe, spreading from its black centre through dark brown, purple, deep blue, and finally red edging into a yellowy-orange at the edges.

He had been making reassuring noises, comments, clicks of the tongue, nods of approval as he examined the first results. Now he just stood, staring at the lazily rotating images as they blurred in front of his eyes.

'Well?'

He did not turn. If he refocused, he could see Benny reflected in the screen. She was sitting on the examination table, legs hanging off the side, almost to the floor. Braxiatel was standing beside her, looking across at Denson. At the screens. He saw Braxiatel take her hand, saw her look at him, could guess the puzzled, anxious, frightened expression he could not make out in the distorted reflection. The picture on the screen turned so that the dark patch crossed her face, blotting out her image.

He took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry,' he said, trying to keep his voice calm and reassuring, though he had no idea why. 'So very sorry.'

Only when he heard her sudden sob did he turn, did he face her.

She choked back her tears almost at once, wiping her face with the back of her free hand, the other still held by Braxiatel. 'So, what's the problem?' she asked through an attempt at a smile. 'Too much alcohol? Not enough exercise?'

This was easier. He could explain impartially what the results showed. If she was up to listening. They could all pretend that they were discussing someone else, someone who wasn't there in the room. Dying.

'This dark area is the problem, I'm afraid,' he said, turning back to the screen. He could hear her approaching, almost feel her peering over his shoulder as he tapped his index finger on the image. 'It's already spread quite a way round the initial point of infection. You're lucky that it started in an area of the brain that's relatively inactive. Otherwise there would be some symptoms. Blurred vision, loss of memory?'

She shook her head.

'Headaches, perhaps?'

'A few. Mild.'

'They'll get worse, I'm afraid.'

'For how long? How long have I...?' Her voice tailed off, she was biting her lower lip.

'Difficult to say.' He avoided her eyes. 'You'll notice some degradation in your mental faculties in a week maybe. After that, the process will seem to accelerate as the problem spreads. As the brain dies. Perhaps a month in all. Give or take a week.'

She was nodding, as if she understood. 'And the treatment?'

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He glanced at Braxiatel. The other man shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment as he did so.

'The truth,' Braxiatel said quietly. 'She should know the truth.'

'All right.' He sighed. 'I can give you some tablets. For the pain, if there is some. I'd suggest a sedative too, till you get over the shock.'

She nodded. Waiting. After a while, she looked at Braxiatel, then back at Denson. 'Is that it?'

'There's nothing else I can do.' Suddenly he didn't know what to do with his hands. They were clenched in front of him, then at his sides, then in his pockets... 'I'm... sorry. Really.'

'But, some specialist treatment? A second opinion?'

'I'm afraid it's too late. Far too late.' They were all looking at the screen again. 'The damage is already being done. We might slow the progress, but only by disconnecting or bypassing mental faculties that are important.'

'Turn me into a vegetable and I'll live another week or two?'

He nodded dumbly.

'Thanks. But no thanks.' She looked round, found a chair and slumped down.

'Perhaps if we knew how this happened...' Denson said.

'You mean it's not a natural phenomenon?' Braxiatel asked.

'It may be. But even so, there might be a trigger, something that kicked it off. A catalyst.'

'Like a knock on the head? Or an allergic reaction of some sort?' Braxiatel asked.

'Or a Mary-Sue,' Benny said quietly. She looked up at them, her eyes large and moist. 'That's it, isn't it? That backstreet hack screwed it up. Screwed me up.'

Denson frowned. 'You had a Mary-Sue? A personality transplant? Recently?'

'A few months back. It was supposed to erase itself. I thought it did.'

'Would that fit?' Braxiatel asked. 'Could it have gone wrong, and started to erase Benny's real personality?'

Denson shrugged. 'Perhaps. The timing could be right, depending on the rate of acceleration, but I'd need to take more readings over time to check that. Certainly a mental

invasive of that type could cause severe damage. But I'm not an expert.'

'Who is?' Braxiatel demanded.

'Well, that's part of the problem with the process. Nobody really knows much about it, except it works. Usually. But often with side effects.'

'Side effects?' She was staring at them, her mouth open. 'Side effects,' she said again, and shook her head. 'Christ almighty, I'm dying and it's a *side effect*.' She stood up suddenly, the chair pushed back, scraping across the floor. 'God, I need a drink.'

Denson's reaction was automatic rather than sensitive. 'Actually, I'd avoid -'

'Would you?' she shouted at him from across the small room. 'Would you really? And that'll buy me another day or two, will it?'

'Benny,' Braxiatel said quietly. 'Benny, please, he's just-'

'I know,' she said. She was shaking now, fists clenched at her sides. 'Well, it's my decision not his. It's my life, and I'll finish it how I damn well choose.'

'Please, Benny...' Braxiatel said, reaching out his hand.

'And you can piss off as well,' she screamed at him suddenly. Then she turned and ran from the room. Denson could still hear her sobs for a long time after they had faded into the distance.

With the light just beginning to improve, Garshal aligned the magnetometer and checked the resistance of the surface sand. The satellite mapping and the geophysics results had shown an area of unusually high conductivity to the north end of the site. So far, the team had neglected this area, spending their time instead in clearing the temple floor and surrounding areas. But soon they would have to decide whether it was worth while excavating this anomaly. But in order to make an informed decision, both Benny and Dr Winston had decided they needed more data.

The mapping data suggested there was a slight incline round the edges of the anomaly, that it was raised up a few inches from the rest of the area, but this was undetectable to the naked eye. Even Garshal's vision was unable to pick out the raised area, or any sort of shape, at ground level. But the magnetometer should help to define the shape of whatever was buried. Then they could decide whether it was an unusual rock stratum, some other natural phenomenon, or something worth investing the time and effort in excavating.

The figure was approaching out of the rising sun. Garshal did not see the shape at first, but then his enhanced vision detected the movement, isolated it, produced a silhouette image that he matched with data on the expedition members. When it found a match, it reduced again the flow of adrenalin and stood down Garshal's weapons systems.

'How's it going?' the newcomer asked.

'I am still preparing to survey the site.' Garshal turned his attention back to the device he was configuring, taking the readings from the top layer of sand as a baseline. 'Have you come to help?'

The other person smiled. Somehow it was a mirthless, macabre gesture. 'No, but you can help me.'

Garshal's first intimation that anything was wrong was as his balance faltered. He swayed heavily on his feet, the sun still blazing into his eyes. But now his vision seemed unable to compensate. His head felt as if it were too large for the helmet that encased it. System after system was flat-lining as he struggled to remain upright.

Hands were coming at him, huge, dark, silhouetted hands reaching for his head. He could sense rather than see the energy drawn into them, out of him. Could feel his very being sucked into the fingertips as they closed the distance, closer, closer.

Then the hands touched the sides of his helmet, and he could feel the life force going from him, could hear the moan of satisfaction from his attacker as the energy flowed into a new home. Garshal's skin felt as if the little moisture it contained was being bled away. His insides felt as if they were shrinking, collapsing, drying. His knees gave way, bucking as the fluid dried in his joints and he sank down to a kneeling position. The sun was gone, below his line of sight now.

His vision was filled with the chest of his attacker, the arms stretching past his eyes, out of sight as they wrapped round his head. Darkness. It was a supreme effort to move his own arm, to bring his hand up. The attacker seemed not to notice until the hand reached the chest, grabbing, clutching, trying to gain a purchase. Then the killer sprang back, leaving Garshal kneeling precariously in the cool, dry sand. One of Garshal's gauntlets was tearing at his own throat, as if trying to make a hole for air to get through to his parched, collapsed lungs. The other slowly raised itself to his mouth, forcing open the rigid jaws.

Then the massive, heavy shape of the Neo-Aretian toppled forward into the sand and lay still. A shadow was cast across the ground towards the body, elongated and thin. Then the shadow shimmered and moved, as the figure that cast it turned and walked back into the blazing dawn sun.

'Benny should know about this.' Clarence was standing over the body as Denson examined it.

'I think we should leave her to get some rest,' Braxiatel said. 'She needs a little time.' He looked away, into the sun high above them. 'I think we all do,' he said quietly.

'How is he taking it?' Clarence asked, nodding towards where Jason stood.

Jason was standing with Emilia Winston a short way off. She had no desire to get any closer to the body, and he had stayed with her while the others approached. Now they stood at a short distance, watching without comment.

'Better than she is, for what it's worth.'

Denson stood up, dusting his hands on his overalls. 'Dried out,' he said. 'Mummified, like Dr Follett.' He drew his foot across the sand, making a shallow trench as he spoke. 'Again, it could be natural causes. An effect, perhaps, of the shell, of the implants. Some reaction to the life support systems after death. But...'

'But that would be rather a coincidence,' Clarence agreed.

'There is no such thing as coincidence,' Braxiatel said.

Denson sighed. 'Right, let's get the body back to the medical unit, and I can make a proper examination.'

He made to bend down, obviously expecting Clarence and Braxiatel to help him. Clarence was already stooped down, when Braxiatel caught Denson's arm.

'No,' he said. 'Leave him here.'

'What? But we can't -'

'We can.' Braxiatel lifted Denson slowly to his feet, looking him in the eye. 'If he were wounded, if there were still a chance of a trace of life, then yes we could move him. But he is a warrior. He died here, and here he remains. It's their way. Tradition.'

Denson looked back down at the body, lying on its side, legs bent at the knees, the head snapped back as if looking upward. 'Hardly dignified,' he protested.

'It's not about dignity. It's about honour and tradition.'

Braxiatel knelt by the body. 'Do you have a small coin?' he asked, patting his pockets. 'I don't think I have one on me.'

Denson checked his pockets. He had. 'Here you are. What's it for?'

'To pay the Journeyman.' Braxiatel took the coin. 'Thank you.' He gently inserted his fingers into Garshal's mouth. Then, abruptly, he stood up and handed back the coin.

'Is that it? Journeyman paid?'

'No. Or rather, yes. He already has a coin in his mouth.'

They stood in silence for a few moments, looking down at the prone form in the sand.

'So he had enough time, to make his preparations for death,' Clarence said.

'So it would seem,' Braxiatel said. 'How you face that death is of the utmost importance to his people.' He stood upright, feet slightly apart, and saluted, old Martian style - right fist over left breast. 'An honourable ending,' he said.

The room was a mess. More of a mess even than usual. Her first reaction had been to fling anything movable at the far wall, screaming abuse and insult at each innocent inanimate object in turn. It had made her feel better only in that it vented her frustration and anger. Now she was ready to cry rather than scream. Benny leant back, rubbed her eyes, and thought guiltily that Joseph would have a fit when he saw it.

It's a dream, a nightmare. Unreal.

For a while she had just lain there, on the bed, hugging Wolsey tighter and tighter. Eventually she had held him so tight he had struggled free with a yowl of annoyance and jumped to the floor. Then she had lain there alone, in the dark, sobbing. Her whole body seemed to be convulsing as she cried, the whole bed, the whole room moving with her. She cried until she was sure that she must have no more moisture left in her body, or that she would find herself floating like Alice in a pool of her own tears. She lay there, panting, drained in every way.

After a while, she had no idea how long, she put the lights on. She sat at her desk, stared at the plastic surface. She got out her diary. Then she put it away again. So many things she wanted to do in so little time now. And yet she could muster up enough energy or enthusiasm for none of them.

How can it be? It can't be true. It isn't happening.

She just sat there, weeping quietly. Why me? Why now? The thoughts went round and round in her mind. Her dying mind. It was ridiculous, a mistake. She had never felt better. Well, maybe she had, but she wasn't ill. Not *ill* ill. And she had survived so much, had lived through things she should not have done. To end it all like this... to fade away, to eke out her last few days, weeks if she were lucky, rather than

die heroically in a moment, or fade away gracefully in her old aged bed...

Why me? Oh God, why? I'm real - I'm *me*. This happens to other people. Not *me*, for God's sake.

She buried her head in her hands, pulled at her hair, rubbed at her eyes and forehead, as if she could somehow burrow inside and root out the canker that ate at her brain. She had moments of calm, short periods of not-so-bad when she saw the pitiful advantages of knowing, being able to prepare for death, of having time. Then, suddenly, in a flash of emotion so intense it was almost violent, the moment would be gone and she was doubled up again, sobbing her guts out.

There was no revelation, no instant of time when she knew, really knew, that it was true, that she really *was* dying. That it was happening to *her*, to Bernice Summerfield, and that there was nothing anyone else could do about it, and all she could do herself was to make the best of it. Whatever the hell that might mean. It was just a coming to terms with it, gradually. Coming to realize that she already knew there was nothing to be done, that she already knew she must just get on and occupy her mind while it still functioned.

'Oh God,' she said out loud, not for the first time. 'Here I am at the greatest archaeological excavation of the century, or near enough, and I'm neglecting the opportunities just because I've discovered I'm dying.' She bit back a sob. Smiled through watery eyes at Wolsey as he watched her from the floor in the corner by the bed. 'That's no excuse to pass up the chance of making a real impact here, of actually achieving something with my life rather than chasing about the universe with a trowel and a notebook.'

That was perhaps the turning point. That was when she decided she was going to discover everything there was to know about the Oracle of the Lost, about their current situation. Within minutes she was surrounded by papers that had been strewn across the floor. The screen of her console was a constant waterfall of text and images as she scanned through everything she could get access to. The

copy of *Living Archaeology* lay open on the desk, yellow stickies poking out of every chapter, the spine broken through overuse and having hit the wall at considerable speed. Gregor's logbook was open beside it, Louisa Mikelz's letter buried in a mass of papers and floptical disks on the floor somewhere near by.

After an hour, she even opened a bottle of her emergency wine. It was buried deep in an air-cooled compartment of her rucksack, cushioned against the stresses and strains of the archaeological universe and preserved at exactly the right temperature for research purposes.

As she paused to pour a second glass, Benny realized she had not thought about herself, about her own predicament, for several minutes now. She really had managed to immerse herself in her work. And in thinking that, of course the spell - those few precious moments of respite - was broken.

Her glass froze at her lips. Where had she read about someone immersing themselves in their work after a personal crisis, a trauma. As a way of coping with it, perhaps. She set down the glass and surveyed the piles of paper, the books, the disks. Her hand drummed an irregular rhythm on the console screen as she tried to recall where she had been, what medium her eyes had been following, what she had thought... Someone who had been close to the end of their life...

Then, suddenly, in a flash she had it. She pushed aside papers and grabbed for the book. 'Memory still works then,' she muttered in triumph as she leafed through the pages for the passage she remembered. Unless, she thought, I've forgotten how well it used to work. And for the first time in a long while, as she started reading, she grinned.

EXTRACT FROM *LIVING ARCHAEOLOGY*,
THE BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD WATKINSON,
BY HERVE POTTLE

Whatever the exact nature of the events on Paracletes, his colleagues and friends all agree that Watkinson was not himself when he returned. Save for occasional flashes of inspiration and wit, such as his famous final lecture, he was quiet and withdrawn. Gone was the outgoing, ebullient professor with time for everyone and no shortage of opinions ready to be given. Instead, Watkinson became almost a recluse.

Irma Fendcastle, who describes herself as Watkinson's personal assistant for the final two years of his life, recalls how he spent most of the time locked in his office. Her own perception is that the change came over him not immediately on his return from Paracletes but rather when he went through his waiting correspondence. But in all likelihood, this was merely the first opportunity she herself had to witness the degree of change in the man. The events of the previous weeks had a profound effect, and we cannot expect even a man of Watkinson's undoubted ability and genius to remain his normal self after surviving, alone among his fellows of Paracletes, such an ordeal.

The way in which Watkinson strove to deal with his inner turmoil and probable feelings of guilt is what surprised many of his closer colleagues. It is well documented that at least one of the messages waiting for him on his return was from Oleg Mikelz. (Some sources claim that other messages from Mikelz's doomed expedition went astray, but I discount this given the almost pedantic diligence of Watkinson in filing his correspondence and papers.) Perhaps latching on to this epistle, Watkinson spent his last days at the university going

back over the very sources and documents which he had been so scathing of when Mikelz cited them as his own area of research.

Lancelot DeMeuve recalls: 'We barely saw him during that short period. He would emerge, his features pale and drawn, to give the few lectures he had remaining. For the most part they were sorry affairs by his usual standards. Only that remarkable final lecture of his possessed any of the usual spark. I suppose we were not surprised, given what he must have been through. Standing in front of an audience, depleted by the deaths he had witnessed around him on Paracletes, cannot have been easy. Standing there, talking to the friends of the students who had died... Who can tell what was in his mind at the time. We were astounded that he did it at all, but he was nothing if not diligent.'

Similarly, Professor Pietre Anstruther says: 'He immersed himself in his work, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. It was almost as if he knew that he too was dying. Perhaps he did. Perhaps when he left us he was going to die in some chosen archaeological backwater, alone and in peace. We shall probably never know where he went or why.'

Miall Bomford, a university librarian at the time, comments: 'Of all the subjects to choose, I think the quest for Delfus-Orestes was extremely uncharacteristic. More than anything else, I saw this as a signal of the change in him. He would order up volume after volume of Delfan myths. He sent for Plackstead's *Wonders of the Ancient Universe* on three separate occasions, I remember. He was always very scathing of Plackstead. And no end of star charts and gazetteers.'

But whatever thoughts and recriminations for the events on Paracletes were going through his brain, the events of Watkinson's last day at the university seem clear. He spent the morning in his study as usual, sending out for lunch.

Then he emerged soon after lunch proclaiming, according to some witnesses (but not all), 'Eureka, I have found it!' He gave what was to be his final lecture that afternoon, and then returned to his apartment. He had already chartered a

shuttle and, as we now know, had, with all his usual painstaking attention to detail, packed supplies and equipment for a lengthy field trip. The shuttle is logged as leaving the spaceport at 19.31 that evening and left local space monitoring at 21.03.

Whether he was actually on it or not, Edward Watkinson, the greatest archaeologist of our age, was never seen or heard from again.

CONVERSATION

Braxiatel leant forward and scooped up a handful of the small atones. 'Everyone else is afraid to talk to you,' he said.

There was a small cluster of pebbles about a yard in front of him. Other individual stones were scattered further away where they had landed. Another pebble dropped into the middle of the group with a clicking sound, skidded along, humped into a fellow and span to a stop.

He was sitting cross-legged on the flagstones in front of the Oracle. As he spoke, he tossed the pebbles, one at a time, in front of him. An automatic, repeated gesture.

'But you're the only one I feel I can talk to.' *Click*. 'Are you able to understand irony?'

Click.

'I understand the concept,' the Oracle said. 'But I am aware that I do not appreciate the reality.'

Click.

Braxiatel gave no indication of having heard her. 'Their lives arc so short,' he said. *Click*. 'They are always just a stone's throw away from the abyss. You know that. So do they. We all take it into account. Make arrangements, compromises.' *Click*. 'Yet they struggle and fight and protest against the inevitable.' *Click*. 'And is it any more depressing, any more of an emotional shock, to discover the inevitable is just ever so slightly closer?' *Click*. 'The hair's breadth of a part of a blink away.'

Click.

'Time is relative,' the Oracle said. 'You have told me that. It is as long as you think it is. As short as you decide.'

'Such a waste.' And with a sudden, angry movement he flung the remaining stones across the floor. 'Such a dreadful waste.' He dusted his palms against each other, a slow deliberate gesture. 'I have so few friends. But, well, she's like

family.’ He stared into the distance, into the darkness of the night. His tongue clicked against his teeth, mimicking the sound of the pebbles on the ground.

‘Have I ever told you about my family?’ he asked after an age. ‘I forget.’

‘Never.’

He nodded. ‘Not much to tell. The problem is, I suppose, when people come to expect things of you that you can’t deliver. If you never deliver, they have no expectations. Bui being right most of the time, having the answer most of the time, makes it so much worse when you’re wrong, when you don’t know. When you just can’t help.’ He rubbed his index finger over his bottom lip. ‘It’s to do with respect and it’s to do with friendship. You know, when I was young, I never wanted to conform. I wanted to get out, to do and see things. There just seemed to be so much out there that we were’ denied. I couldn’t cope with that.’ He smiled thinly. ‘I guess, it’s in the blood. That’s why I collect things now, amass them, hoard them. I just need them to be there for me. But also for others. For sharing. For enjoying. For wonder.’

He reached out again and scooped up a few of the pebbles, rolling them together in his fist. ‘So I had an idea. It was obvious we’d have to get involved in some things, some time. So I made sure that when that happened it was me they came to first. Made sure that I conformed so much to their way of thinking that when they had to break the mould, they asked me to do it. That needed patience, but that’s something I’ve learnt. So I conformed, excelled even. I graduated with a fistful of firsts.’ He shook his fist in the air, holding it up for the Oracle to see. ‘But in fact, they were worth nothing to me.’ He opened his hand and the pebbles fell to the ground. ‘I instigated research projects, made clever proposals, agreed with arrogant idiots. All in line with what was expected, what was encouraged. I pushed the envelope, but I never tried to break through it. Not then. Not till later.’

He shifted slightly on the cold ground. ‘Now, there was another approach I could have taken. More drastic, less patient. By the time my brother was doing his exams, I was

already an unofficial ambassador, already off on missions the like of which nobody had ever dreamt of before. Making a great show of martyring myself to the necessity while actually relishing every moment of it. Making sure everyone flue felt sorry for me that I had to do these terrible things rather than sit at home, cosy and safe for an eternity.'

He gave a short, half-laugh. 'I never realized how jealous he was. Or how impatient. At first he followed my example, I think. He respected me, which I suppose was a good part of the problem. He wanted, I think, to *be* me. And the resentment came later when he realized there couldn't be two of us, that we are different. So he had a different plan.'

Braxiatel laughed again as he remembered. The sound echoed round the dark temple ruins, but when it came back it sounded strangely hollow. 'First class degrees,' he said, shaking his head. 'I thought that was clever. But he made sure he scraped through with the barest minimum on the last permitted attempt. And they knew it. Forget getting a first, anyone can do that with a little diligence and application. But what he did took genius. And then he was off. Having thumbed his nose at them academically, he did it physically. By leaving. He had seen what I was up to. By then I was out, I'd made the case for having someone always out there in the universe, and won the ensuing arguments. I was the one. And there was no way they'd let anyone else do it. So he didn't ask, he just went.' Braxiatel laughed again, but it was a quieter, more melancholy sound. 'I can do that too, try to stop me if you're so clever. That's what he thought.'

There was silence for a while again. 'I miss him, I suppose that's what I'm saying,' Braxiatel said at last. 'But he's out there, somewhere. He'll always be out there. That's family for you. Real family. But Benny... I always knew... But you don't...' He breathed out heavily, a stream of pale mist in the night. 'Not until you have to. Until now. It's the difference between knowing and *really* knowing. Between supposing and believing. And it's like standing by and watching while you lose a - what? Sister? Daughter perhaps?'

‘You ask me questions,’ said the Oracle quietly, ‘but you expect and want no answers.’

Braxiatel’s smile was a sad curl of the mouth. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘she’s even taught you something, my friend.’

‘May I speak?’ the Oracle asked after a while.

‘Of course.’

‘It seems to me that not being able to do anything is no excuse for doing nothing.’

Braxiatel sat motionless for several seconds. Then he asked: ‘Do you have a specific proposal?’

‘I do not understand enough about your universe, about the way you work, you think, you feel. But I do know one thing.’

‘Which is?’

‘There are always questions which must be answered. And every answer raises fresh questions.’

Braxiatel was looking at the ground. And as the Oracle spoke, he realized that he could see every tiny crack, every imperfection in the flagstone in front of him. ‘That’s very true,’ he said slowly. ‘Very true indeed.’

Clarence sat alone in the dark with his thoughts. He had been wondering about what B-Aaron had told them. But that seemed less important now. He was worried that he had no idea how to respond to Benny. Should he behave as if nothing had happened? Or should he talk to her about it? Or should he cry? He just did not know.

Jason was also sitting alone, but with the lights on. He was at his desk, staring ahead. There was a mirror resting on the desk, angled so it leant against the wall. Jason stared at his reflection, running a finger down his face, feeling the texture of the skin. In his mind’s eye he could imagine the same skin flaking away, shrivelling up and tearing apart to reveal the cracked skull beneath. He could imagine the teeth rotting in their blackened sockets, the hair whitening, becoming brittle, falling out. And he knew that it was just a matter of time.

Winston was not asleep. She was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling which was barely visible above her. She knew every blemish, every imperfection now.

She heard the tap at the door, but assumed it was a noise from further down the corridor. A door closing perhaps.

Then it came again, slightly louder. 'Dr Winston? Emilia?' The voice was low, as if trying not to wake her if she was asleep. She recognized it, and got up.

Hayward Denson was standing in the corridor. His face was drawn, looking older than ever. He was stooped, weary mid looked close to tears. 'When you are my age,' he said quietly as she stood aside to let him in, 'you anticipate death. You look out for it every time you sleep, whenever you wake. It is to be expected.' He shook his bowed head. 'But in one so young.' He looked up at her. 'I'm sorry. I just wanted to talk. I should go, it's hardly fair to unburden myself on you.'

Emilia Winston shook her head. 'No, stay,' she said quietly. 'We are neither of us young. But poor Divson Follett, and then Garshal... And now...' She turned away, close to tears herself. She expected it, but was still surprised to feel his hand gently on her shoulder.

'How did you know you'd find me here?'

'I didn't,' Benny said as she sat down beside him, crossing her legs to match. 'But you weren't in your room, and there aren't that many places to look.'

They sat in silence for a while. Then she asked: 'What have you been doing?'

'Chatting. You?'

'I decided I want to know what happened here. What happened to Mikelz, to the others.' She picked up one of the pebbles that Braxiatel had been tossing, rolled it between her fingers, then let it drop.

Click.

'I don't know if it's at all related to Watkinson's disappearance,' she admitted. 'I don't know if what's happened here, if Follett's death, is somehow connected or not. But I

want to find out. And I haven't got long. So I wondered if you could help.'

He took her hand. 'Benny...'

She pulled it away. 'I don't want sympathy. Not right now.'

He shook his head. 'It's not that.'

'What then?'

He hesitated just a moment, then he told her. 'Garshal's dead too. I'm sorry.'

'Oh no.' She leant forward, rocking slowly on her haunches. 'Life's so unfair.'

'There are no guarantees.'

'Poor Garshal.' She shook her head. 'I don't know. Follett, Garshal, Skutloid, Drexton. No end of people on Dellah. Good people. And here am I blessed with a few extra weeks, a little longer and I'm bitter about it.' The starlight glistened on the streaks down her face when she turned to him. 'What is wrong with this universe?'

They sat in silence for a while. Then Braxiatel said: 'It's not strictly archaeology. In fact, it could be called cheating. But there is a way to discover something of what happened here, what happened to Mikelz.'

'Really?'

He nodded.

'Well, I never worried about cheating before. What is it?'

'It's obvious really. We ask the Oracle.'

She stared at him open-mouthed. 'Ask the Oracle?'

He nodded. 'It's easy to be seduced by the fact that she can foresee the future into thinking that's all you can ask about. But she was here eighty years ago. Whatever happened, she was here.'

'As simple as that?'

'Occasionally, things are as simple as they appear,' the Oracle said.

THE ORACLE'S STORY

I speak of what I know for fact, and what I surmise from those facts. I speak of the events you ask about, of the day that Oleg Mikelz met his destiny, fulfilled the foretelling.

You will already know much of the story, I am sure. You will already know that Mikelz was self-centred and paranoid. Sampling the flow of such lives, making predictions based on extremes of such characters and extrapolating from past knowledge, is easier with those such as he. And so I was able to offer more clarity than I can to those whose lives are shrouded in complexity and paradox.

Events had conspired to convince him that his wife Louisa was unfaithful. His anger was compounded by the guilt he felt at having brought her here, and at having abandoned her to Gregor's attentions while he spent his time occupied with me. His jealousy was laced with guilt which makes for a strong and heady mixture. His love mingled with his self-esteem and ego to form the catalyst.

From what he told me after the event, and from the evidence I perceive, Mikelz confronted Louisa in the main room of the dwelling they had established when they arrived here. It was disgorged from the belly of the craft they came in, assembled from pre-formed components. It was not, Mikelz knew in his heart of hearts, an appropriate place for his wife to spend her time.

I can sample the emotions as well as the thoughts of those I see. I know she loved him. Loved him with a passion. She did not care that he was older than her, indeed that was a part of his attraction for her. Experience and knowledge are a lure of their own. When you have beauty such as she, when you know that any man is there for the asking, you can afford to choose the right one, choose for the inner attributes and not for the outward appearances.

But this meant she was more concerned at his apparent rejection of her rather than less. This meant that she confided in Gregor, that she tried to glean from him what the problem might be. She knew that Gregor was a kindred spirit to Mikelz, that they shared a passion at least. And Gregor for his part was keen to please his mentor and to take care of his wife.

This meant, too, that Louisa was ill-prepared for the accusations and anger that Mikelz threw at her that fateful day.

I do not know exactly how she responded, but from the outcome I suspect that she did not acquit herself well. That she was astonished and upset. That she was saddened and distraught. That Mikelz misread these emotions for the ones he expected. He found proof in the very evidence that should have given the lie to his suspicions.

But he was past caring by then. Past caring for her, eaten away by his own guilt and inner remorse. Perhaps she begged for death, seeing no future for herself if she had lost his love. Perhaps this he took as the final confirmation, as the final desperate act to clear her name, to prove him wrong. Methinks she did protest too much.

And after he killed her, as he cradled her body in his arms and wept for the might-have-beens in this life, Gregor chanced across him. Chance cannot be foreseen, and this chance was as unfortunate as can be predicted. Even as he wept for his guilt and for the lost love of his dead wife, her supposed lover chanced upon the scene.

Mikelz was in tears as he related to me how he had killed his friends. He was, he thought, strong enough to admit that my prophecy was fulfilled, that I had known about their forbidden love behind his back, He swore that I had foreseen the future.

I had expected no less, but I had hoped for better understanding from one so steeped in my myth, my legend.

To his credit, he did then begin to see the awful wonder that the Delfans beheld. He began to appreciate why they turned against me, why they saw my foretelling as a two-

edged weapon. He asked why they did not destroy me. But I could tell that he knew already.

And out of sorrow, remorse perhaps, I explained what he could not see. As you have surmised, I do not foresee the future. I do not prophesy in that sense. My gift is the foretelling.

He could not at first see the distinction. But as we spoke, as he asked and I answered as best as my limitations would allow, he began to perceive the truth. I could see the understanding welling up in his mind even as my own sorrow welled up in my own. He saw it then, saw that I predict events and actions based on experience, on existing and pre-existing data, based on patterns of behaviour and science that I have perceived or been shown down the ages. He began to see that my terrible gift, my purpose, is to be correct in what I foretell.

To make what I foretell come about.

Was Louisa truly unfaithful to him? Or was it merely his perception of things, based on my foretelling and his interpretation of that? Was that merely the pretext on which he killed her, to bring about the events of the prophecy he knew he must fulfil?

I said to him, even as he asked me this, that it did not matter. That the events took place as predicted, that my task was done. The end result is the same, whatever the motivation behind it.

But I sensed that it mattered to him. I know not what the difference was, but I could see the sadness mingling with the anger in his heart.

‘What do you want of me?’ he cried, and I could feel the anguish in his words, could compare it with my own.

‘You already know the answer,’ I told him. ‘Just as the ancient Delfans knew.’

He nodded, which I took as understanding. Indeed he did know. And he faced the same choice as the Delfans - whether to fulfil his destiny, to prove my final prophecy correct as he thought and to destroy me, or to let me live. If he destroyed me, then he gave the lie to self-will. If not, then

that would be admission that he himself chose to murder his wife and friend. Should he accept fate or take responsibility? And if I were to continue to live, what suffering for others yet to come?

He made his choice. Just as one day, soon, you must make yours.

THE SHIP

‘And what,’ Benny asked quietly, ‘is it that you want?’

The Oracle turned her great head towards her, looking down from her throne. Her voice was somehow altered as she spoke, the melodic sound slightly discordant, the harmony broken.

‘I want to die,’ she said. And Benny could see that, as she said it, she wept.

And what happened,’ Braxiatel asked quietly, ‘to Oleg Mikelz?’

When the Oracle had finished speaking, Benny and Braxiatel just stared at each other. Dawn was breaking, a pale glow on the foreshortened horizon. Their faces were lit by the first rays of the sun.

‘The magnetic anomaly the satellite survey picked up,’ Benny said.

‘Garshal was going to survey it in detail. If he had, we’d have got an outline. We’d have known.’

Benny was nodding, laughing. ‘We’d see it was a ship. Mikelz’s ship.’

‘So what do you want to do about it?’ Braxiatel asked.

‘Do?’ She was astounded. ‘I want to go and dig it up, of course.’

They were not bothered about scraping the hull of the ship, so programming a blower was not as precise a task as had been the case with the earlier excavations. Braxiatel fed in an approximate set of parameters, guessing at the depth and taking the surface area from the geographical information system. The only part he was especially careful with was in programming the blower to steer well clear of Garshal’s body on the edge of the excavation site.

They stood at the edge of the temple, watching as the blower set to work. Denson and Winston were standing close together, Benny noticed. Jason stood behind her, put his hand on her shoulder, and Benny was content to let it rest there for the moment. Clarence and Braxiatel stood a short way off.

As they stood shielding their eyes against the rising sun, the scarred, dented, fractured metal hull of the craft was slowly uncovered, then the blower dug round the sides until the broken planet hopper stood proud of the landscape. A broken-backed insect lying dead in the sand. Near by, dwarfed by the ship, lay Garshal's twisted body. In contrast to the excavation, the gently blowing sand had already begun to bury the corpse. It looked, disconcertingly, as if he were trying to climb up out of the sand and join the watchers above.

The main hatch was dented in, the hinges almost twisted off by the weight of sand and the years. Benny pulled it clear and pushed her way inside the flight deck. Denson was close behind her and went at once to the body strapped into the pilot's seat. Like the other two at the original base, it was almost skeletal. The clothing had survived better, but the bones were stripped bare. One hand was on the main power lever, had pushed it to its full extent. The bones of the fingers were curled round the grip. As Denson touched the body, the forearm fell away in a cloud of dust, clattering to the floor and leaving the skeletal hand pathetically attached to the controls.

'Broken neck,' Denson said. 'And several other fractures consistent with a crash at high speed. He'd have died instantly.'

'Lucky him,' Benny murmured. She was hunting across the control deck, searching for what she was after. There - that was it. She gave a cry of triumph and pressed the small button, hoping the mechanism was mechanical rather than electronic. Nothing happened.

'Let me.' Jason was reaching past her. He had a thin-bladed knife in his hand and jammed it into the slot by the

button. 'There's a release mechanism. In case the power's off.' A disk popped out of the slot and Jason lifted it balanced on the knife blade. He held it for Benny to take.

What is it?' Winston asked from the doorway behind them. 'What have you found?'

'It's the visual log,' Benny said. 'With any luck and justice, it should show us what happened on the ship's last trip.'

VISUAL LOG

The motors were screaming, stressed beyond their design tolerance. Mikelz hunched over the controls, forcing the space hopper over on to its back, then downward, into a dive.

‘Are you watching this?’ Mikelz said, his voice a low growl.

Above the sound of the tortured engines, the voice of the Oracle was clear over the talkback.

‘You see,’ she said, ‘you cannot resist your fate, your destiny.’ If there was a tinge of sadness in the words, it was lost in the scream of the ignition systems as they cut in, forcing the ship downward with a ferocity that pressed Mikelz back hard into the padded seat.

‘This is not destiny,’ he said through gritted teeth as he wrestled to hold the course steady. ‘Nor fate. But we can both let others be the judge of that, can’t we?’

‘Who will know, save ourselves?’ the Oracle asked.

‘The universe will know the truth before long.’ The ship was levelling off now, in a powered free-fall towards the planetoid. ‘I sent a message to Edward Watkinson. I told him everything. About Louisa. And about Gregor.’ He took his hand off the controls for long enough to wipe the moisture from his eyes. ‘About you.’ He grinned suddenly. ‘You can only respond to questions, I know,’ he said. ‘So what do you think of that?’

‘It will be seen as a confession, I foretell that.’

Mikelz laughed. The stress was clear on his face, the nerves evident in his voice. ‘It is a confession,’ he said. ‘You try to argue things both ways, but either way you are wrong. Do you know that?’

There was a hint of worry in the words that filled the cabin. ‘You fulfil your destiny as foretold.’

‘No,’ Mikelz said quietly, shaking his head. ‘No, that’s not true. I’ve worked it all out. It became clear as I wrote to Watkinson. I won’t ask you if you want to hear this, but it’s all down to context. The context of action is more important than the action itself.’

The ship was shaking now, the cabin a blur as if about to come to pieces.

‘You see,’ Mikelz was saying, ‘if I am acting out of free will now, then you have nothing to do with it and your foretelling counts for naught. Or, I am merely an instrument of your predictions, unreasoning, fulfilling the fate that you have decreed for me. And in that case, it is you not I that act now. It is you who is crashing this ship down on yourself. In that case it is you who is responsible for the action, not me. Either way, you see, you are wrong. You are wrong to think you can manipulate me, or you are wrong in your prediction that it is I who would destroy you.’

His last words were all but drowned out by the rising sound of the engines as Mikelz pushed the burn rate to maximum. A red light was flashing at one end of the main console. A buzzer was sounding urgently from behind him. Various collision warnings were lighting up and the autopilot was struggling to engage, constantly overridden by Mikelz as he steered the crashing ship downward in a tight spiral.

On the forward screen, the Temple of the Oracle almost filled the viewing area. It twisted and turned as the ship twisted down towards it. Then the temple edged sideways, disappearing off the side of the screen as the ship flashed past it.

‘You want to die?’ Mikelz was screaming above the engines. ‘I won’t give you that. Buried for ever, alone for ever. Just you and the thoughts of what you have done.’ He gritted his teeth and stared forward, making an effort to keep his eyes open. He could almost make out the individual grains of sand now.

From somewhere behind him, the sound of the Oracle’s answer was lost in the cacophony of sound as the ship hit the ground. Sand sprayed over the screen, blotting out the

view for a moment before the hopper lifted, bounced, then settle again. At the same moment the lights failed and the propulsion unit exploded.

The tidal wave of sand and rock pushed massively across the landscape, washing into the crevices and fissures, breaking against the cliffs and funnelling into the narrows. For a moment it stood poised, curled over the broken remains of the temple, then it came crashing down again. When the dust settled, there was nothing. Just a gentle breeze which barely disturbed the unbroken wastes of sand.

EVIDENCE

The tests took only a few minutes. Denson already had everything set up, and he knew what he was looking for, what needed monitoring. Benny sat through the process without comment, joining him at the screen as he fed in the plastic strip from the monitoring device. Again, a garishly coloured scan of Benny's brain appeared on the screen. On the adjacent screen, Denson had already called up the previous results.

'Miraculous recovery?' Benny asked, trying to smile.

'I'm afraid not. No.' He studied the screen for a while, comparing it with the previous picture, calling up various sets of numbers and readings on each in turn. 'Not all gloom and doom, though,' he said at last.

'Oh?'

'No. The bad news is that the problem is still there. There's no change in your general health.'

'Or lack of it.'

'As you say. But after what must have been a rapid initial spread of the anomaly, it seems to have slowed a bit.'

Benny took this in, trying desperately not to get her hopes up. 'Is it... is it stopping do you think?'

Denson shook his head sadly and sighed. 'I'm afraid not. No. We're talking about an extra day or two, that's all. If it slows further, then perhaps a week.' He looked away. 'Sorry.'

Benny clapped him on the shoulder. 'That's OK. Not your fault. Hey,' she added, 'thanks anyway. At least I know.'

He walked with her to the door. 'Is that a good thing?'

'Oh yes. I think so. On balance.' She paused in the doorway, turned back to face him. 'Think about poor old Follett, he didn't know. Or Garshal, either.'

'I don't know about Follett,' Denson said, 'but Garshal 'knew. Had some knowledge at least.'

Benny frowned. 'How can you tell?'

Denson was heading back into the medical unit, beginning! to tidy away the equipment he had been using. 'He'd put a coin in his mouth.'

Benny was surprised. 'He what?'

'Tradition, apparently. It's to pay the -'

'Yeah, I know what it's for.' She leant against the door frame, mind racing. 'Are you sure? I mean, are you sure it was him that put it there?'

'It was there when we found him. Braxiatel asked me for a coin, then he found Garshal already had one.' Denson had finished putting the equipment away. 'So he had some warning he was dying, wouldn't you say?'

Benny pushed herself away from the door frame. 'Yes,' she said slowly, 'I suppose so.'

Death, or rather the prospect of death, changed people. Benny knew that first hand. As she walked, her feet pushing into the soft sand, she wondered what could have happened to Garshal. For all they now knew about Mikelz and his tragic expedition, they still had no idea how or why Follett and Garshal had died. Benny had still not made a direct connection between the deaths and Watkinson's doomed expedition to Paracletes.

Mikelz had sent messages to Watkinson. Three at least. The last one, assuming he was telling the truth on the log, detailing what had happened here on KS-159. And as far as Benny could tell from the date-time stamp on the video image, and the dates and accounts given in Watkinson's biography, that last message would have been waiting for Watkinson when he returned from Paracletes.

Changes. Changes because of events, because of impending death... Benny blew a long steady breath upward out of her mouth, feeling the movement of air against her face, feeling her fringe pushed upward by the breeze. She closed her eyes for a moment as she trudged on. When she opened them again, Garshal's body was just visible ahead of her.

It took longer than she expected to get to the body. It was lying in the shade of Mikelz's ship, even deeper in the slowly drifting sand now. Benny stooped down beside it, reached out towards it. Then she changed her mind, her hand waiting a second longer before she withdrew it.

'I'm sorry, my friend,' she murmured. 'But I have to know.'

Somehow this was worse. She sat there, at her desk, feeling... nothing. Just numb, empty, drained. It was the betrayal, the sense of shame and outrage. The fact that for her own plight she had sobbed her heart out, and now that she needed to, she couldn't cry any more.

And when the knock on the door came, she knew who it was without asking, without moving.

'Benny?'

She could hear the door opening, the footsteps as he came into the room. 'Benny, I need to talk to you.'

'So talk,' she said, still without turning.

He sighed, a long exhalation. 'You were right, I was speaking to the Oracle, asking what's happened to me, for all the good it did.' He paused, as if summoning up the courage to go on. 'I think,' he said slowly, 'I think I need help.'

She swung round in the chair, surprised. 'You need help?' She could feel the tension on her face, the frown that knotted her brow. 'And where were you when I needed help, Jason? Where were you when I found I was dying? Can't cope with the reality, the emotion, the hassle? Is that it?'

'I thought it best to leave you alone.' His face was a mask of concern, of anxiety. 'I... I just didn't know what to do. What to think ... I didn't believe it. Not at first.' He took a step towards her, and she saw he was slightly unsteady on his feet. 'But I'm here for you now.'

'No you're not,' she said. 'You're here for help. That's what you said.' She stood up, realized she was shaking, that her hands were clenched into tight fists. 'What help can I offer you? Want to know if I've made a will, is that it?'

'Benny, please. No, it's not that. How can you -' He broke off, looked down at his feet. When he looked at her again, it

seemed like he had aged ten years or more. His face was drawn, lined, grey.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Oh, Jason, I'm so sorry.' She was relaxing slightly, the temper going. 'What must it have been like for you?' Then she remembered, felt in her pocket to remind herself, pressed her fingers into it. Her face hardened and she bit back the emotion.

'You have to help me, Benny,' Jason said, his voice strained, cracking.

He was right in front of her now. She could see the grey at the roots of his hair. Was she going grey too? Were they really that old?

'I do love you, Benny. I've always loved you. You know that, don't you?'

She said nothing, was sure of nothing now. Not any more.

'But now you're dying. I'm sorry, but you have to help me. I need you. You're my only hope, my only way to be free of it.' His face was creased up, almost in tears. 'It's my whole life, Benny. But it's only a few weeks for you. You can spare a few weeks for me?' He stepped even closer. 'Can't you?'

Benny took a step backward, felt the edge of the desk behind her, knew she was as far away as she could get. 'What's got into you?' she said, frightened now. 'I didn't believe it, didn't want to believe it. But it's true, isn't it, Jason?' She was fumbling in her pocket, fingers slippery with perspiration and clumsy with fear. At last she managed to pull it out of her pocket and hold it up.

His left eye convulsed, a sudden tick. He stared at what Benny was holding.

'I thought it was odd,' she said, surprised that her voice was calm again now. 'Garshal was so scathing of the old Martian traditions. There was no way he believed in all that stuff about the Journeyman and the Great Hereafter or whatever they have. I thought at first it was a deathbed conversion. Facing death brings lots of things into perspective, Jason. I know that. I couldn't believe the other possibility, but I had to check. I had to be sure.'

She took a step towards him now and Jason stepped back, his eyes still fixed on Benny's upheld hand.

'So I went over there. I managed to get his mouth open just enough to pull out the coin. And then I knew.' She held it up to the light, made sure he could see. 'Garshal wasn't saving this for the Journeyman, was he? He put it there for us to find. To tell us who had killed him.'

The light shone through the double holes on the rim of the coin, the sideways figure of eight. Infinity. 'I gave you this, Jason. To wear for me always.' She pulled back her hand, then threw the coin at him. It bounced off his chest and fell to the floor. 'Well, *always* stops here.'

She strode towards the door, not looking back. 'You have some explaining to do,' she said as she pulled the door open.

But before it was open far, it stopped. Jason was beside her, the door against his boot. He slammed it shut again, reaching out for Benny. She backed away, feeling behind her as she went, feeling for anything she could use to defend herself, to ward him off.

He followed her, tracking her footsteps. 'I had to do it, Benny. Believe me.' His voice had hardened. 'You have to help me. You have to. I need you, Benny.' He was reaching out towards her with one wrinkled hand, the other was at his head, fingers pawing at his lined forehead. 'I can't help it, can't stop it, Benny. Not any more. Sometimes, I don't know who I am even.'

She was against the desk again, hand clawing behind her, pushing aside papers, reaching, feeling, searching.

'That's why you have to help me,' Jason said. 'You have to help me escape from it. A few weeks, Benny.' His voice was almost a whine, wheedling, pleading as he reached for her. 'A few weeks for my life, that's all. Is it so much to ask?' He grabbed her throat, both hands now closing on it, squeezing, clenching. 'You'd die for me, Benny, you've told me that. It's only a few weeks after all.'

Benny's vision was blurring, her head felt like it was going to explode under the pressure as he throttled her. She could see the glistening tears roll down his cheeks. Through the

moist blur, she could see the lines on his face deepen, could see the wrinkles, the white hair, the gritted, rotting teeth as his ageing face closed on hers. A final kiss.

Her hand closed round something behind her, grabbed, held on.

Kiss of death.

The world was turning red, misty red, as she swung her arm round as hard as she could. She heard the flex from the light pull from its wall socket. Felt the slight tug as she wrenched it free. Felt the impact as the heavy rounded base crashed into the back of Jason's head. Saw his face snap sideways as the head was knocked violently aside. She smashed the lamp into the back of his head again. His grip loosened round her throat. And again. She could gasp for breath now. And again. He slipped away, body sagging, mouth hanging open, blood dripping down the side of his face, out of his mouth.

She stood over him, holding the dented, bloody table lamp. Its base was a red mess, tufts of hair clinging to the slippery surface. On the floor, at her feet, lay the body. It seemed to move, and Benny realized it was her, swaying on her feet. She could see the white of the smashed skull, shards of broken bone sticking out of the bloody mess. His cheek was pressed to the floor, so that one lifeless eye stared back up at her, wide open, pupil dilated, unseeing. A sticky pool was spreading out from under him. Her feet were islands. The world was turning red again.

She retched, almost choking as she tried to draw rasping breath at the same time.

Red.

Then black.

FINALE

Benny was on her feet now, bracing herself, feet apart. She could feel the tension on the trigger, feel it slightly slipped under her moist finger. It was difficult to keep the gun aimed, angled back towards her like this. But she held it steady, pointed it right between her eyes, blotted everything from her thoughts except the gun.

And pulled the trigger.

'I've given her a sedative,* Denson said. 'She'll sleep for a while.'

Braxiatel nodded. 'Good.'

They were all in the main living area - Denson, Braxiatel, Clarence and Winston.

'And Jason?' Clarence asked.

Denson shook his head. 'I need to do a post-mortem. It's pretty clear that death was caused by a series of heavy blows to the back of the head.' There was a grim silence for a while. 'There is one thing,' Denson added after a while. 'The body is similar to the others.'

'Mummified?' Winston asked.

'Not exactly. Similar, but not the same. Mote like, exhausted. Aged.' He shrugged. 'I'll know more in a couple of hours.'

'Do you need help?' Braxiatel asked.

'Well..

'I'll help.' Emilia Winston stood up. 'Please, I'd like to.'

'Are you sure you're up to it?' Denson asked. 'It won't be pleasant.'

'I need to do something,' she insisted. 'I'll go mad if I just have to sit around here. And I'm not up to working on the site.'

For a while, Clarence and Braxiatel sat in silence.

'What do you think happened?' Clarence asked at last.

'I don't know. Maybe he attacked her, that seems most likely. But why...?' He opened his hands in a gesture of frustrated ignorance.

'So what happens now?'

'I don't know,' Braxiatel admitted. 'She'll sleep for a while. I've set up a surveillance camera in her room, so we'

know when she wakes. And we can check she doesn't try anything silly.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I'm worried about her. At least Joseph has cleared up the mess. As much as he can.'

Clarence stood up. 'Did she mention a message,' he asked, 'a message from B-Aaron?'

He shook his head. 'Not that I recall.'

'It might be significant, I'd like you to see it.'

Braxiatel nodded. 'All right.'

'B-Aaron says that Jason was on the Worldsphere. That he met with God.'

A few minutes later, in Clarence's room, Braxiatel leant back in the chair, having finished reading through the message. 'And Benny saw this?'

Clarence nodded. 'She got a copy. I assume she read it. A motive?' he suggested.

'Perhaps. But we need to know more.' Braxiatel tapped his finger on his chin. 'Ask B-Aaron if he's found out anything more, would you?'

'Of course.'

'And tell him to keep looking. I'll go and see how Denson's getting along.'

The grey area on the screen was just dead tissue. It had once been a living brain, but now there was nothing - no movement of blood, no heat, no electrical activity.

'It's this that concerns me.' Denson pointed to a long spike of dark red that seemed to be imprinted across the picture.

'What is it?' Braxiatel asked.

'I have no idea. It starts at the eyes, here. That's the widest point. And as you can see it protrudes right into the conscious centres.'

Before Braxiatel could reply, the door opened. It was Clarence.

'She's waking up,' he said.

* * *

How long she lay there, drifting in the half-conscious state between sleeping and waking, she did not know. But gradually Benny's eyes focused and she saw that Braxiatel and Clarence were standing over her. Behind them, still slightly muzzy in the distance, were Emilia Winston and Hayward Denson.

She tried to sit up, but managed only to jam her elbow under herself and lean heavily on that. 'What happened?' Her throat was parched. It was like talking through cotton wool. 'Did I faint?'

'Yes,' Denson said. 'Yes, you fainted.'

She slumped back, covering her eyes with her hand. Her head was pounding. Images and memories vying for attention.

'I had an awful dream,' she said. 'Nightmare, I suppose.'

'Benny,' Clarence said gently.

But she was not really listening. 'I worked it all out though. While I was asleep. It's obvious when you think about it.' She did manage to sit up this time, dragging herself up on the pillow. 'Watkinson was obsessed, right? He got Mikelz's message, he knew what had happened. When he got back from whatever took place on Paracletes, the message was waiting for him. That's what his obsession was. It wasn't madness or trauma, at least not from Paracletes.' She looked round at the people facing her. Four faces turned towards hers. Listening carefully. 'Watkinson didn't just disappear, he didn't go off to die somewhere. He came here. That's what he was doing those last days - he was trying to re-create Mikelz's research. Trying to find the Oracle. Maybe he thought he could get here in time to stop Mikelz killing himself, who knows. But that's it, it has to be.'

Nobody said anything. Had they missed the point? 'Don't you see?' she said. 'Watkinson came *here*.'

Braxiatel looked round at the others. His expression was one of sadness. Now that she looked, they all seemed somehow sad, anxious.

'Benny,' Braxiatel began, his voice as gentle and caring as Clarence's had been.

‘Why are you all here anyway?’ Benny asked suddenly. She pulled herself further up the bed. Somewhere in the dark corners of her mind, something stirred. She saw how they all avoided catching her gaze. ‘The dream...’ She looked down at the covers, saw how crisp and white the sheet was, saw how the folds curled round and back on themselves. Then she looked back up at them, realization and memory crowding in on her suddenly. Her voice was dry, husky, urgent. ‘Where’ Jason?’ she asked.

She insisted on going with them. She was in a daze, still sedated, still in shock. But she insisted.

It was like a funeral procession as the four of them made their way up the slope to the temple. When they arrived, they lined up without speaking, facing the Oracle. A depleted half-circle that imperfectly mirrored the larger group that had faced the Oracle that first day. Then, so much enthusiasm and awe. Now foreboding and disquiet.

She felt like an outsider now. Whereas that first time, it had been *her* expedition, *her* discovery, now Benny felt that the others were avoiding making eye contact with her, had somehow shut her out. But despite these anxieties, it was Benny who spoke. Her voice was still parched, her tone uneven and strained. ‘Did Edward Watkinson come here?’ she asked.

‘Many people have come here over the years.’ The voice was a melodic contrast to Benny’s scratchy tones. ‘What is one among so many?’

‘Don’t be so obtuse,’ Benny shouted angrily. ‘This is fact, not prediction or supposition. Now, did he come here, yes or no?’

There was a slight pause, as if the Oracle was surprised at her outburst. Then: ‘He did.’

‘And he found Mikelz and the others already dead?’

‘Yes.’ There was no hesitation this time.

‘And where did he go afterward?’

‘Nowhere.’ The Oracle turned slightly, looking out across the temple and into the sandy desert beyond. ‘He is still here,’ she said.

It was one of the last of the small mounds of compressed sand left by the blowers. Since Follett’s death, the progress of (lie excavation had slowed and several of the mounds were clustered not far from the base of the Oracle. Clarence went hack for tools, but Benny was already on her hands and knees tearing at the compacted sand with her fingers. Her nails tore and broke, her fingers were scratched and cut. But she continued to pull away at the mound.

When Clarence returned, Denson pulled Benny gently hack, and Clarence and Braxiatel set to work with spades.

The corpse was better preserved than the others. Whether by the dry sand or by whatever had affected Follett and Garshal, the body was dried out, almost mummified. Benny was surprised how small Watkinson had been, was amazed how calm he seemed. And from what was left of him, he seemed to have been far older than she had thought. Braxiatel and Clarence helped her lift the frail form and balance it across her arms. It was much lighter than she had expected. A pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, the lenses cracked and broken, slid off the chest and fell to the stone floor.

In silence, she carried the body of Edward Watkinson, the greatest archaeologist of the century, back down the slope to the medical unit.

‘What happened, Benny? You have to tell us.’

‘It’s so hard to remember.’ She could recall Jason coming to her room. She remembered the coin, could see him advancing on her, hand outstretched, could hear his voice pleading, asking for her life... ‘I know he killed the others. He was going to kill me...’ She closed her eyes and turned away. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘We have to know.’ Braxiatel took her hand. ‘In your own time,’ he said quietly. ‘But it will help you to talk about it. I’m sure it will.’

Denson came into the room. Winston was with him, close on his heel. ‘Can I have a word?’ Denson asked Braxiatel quietly.

‘Of course.’

‘In private.’

Braxiatel stood up. ‘Excuse me a moment, Benny.’ He followed Denson from the room.

Benny watched them go. They were excluding her. They had discovered something and they were keeping her out of it. Didn’t they trust her any more? Didn’t they believe her? What were they planning? Almost without thinking she stood up, made to follow.

But Emilia Winston was beside her. ‘It’s all right,’ she said, smiling. ‘I’ll wait with you.’

Benny could see through the smile. She knew that whatever was going on here, Winston was in on it too.

‘Thank you,’ Benny said, forcing a thin smile. ‘But I think I’ll go to my room and lie down for a bit. If you don’t mind.’

‘Why should I mind?’ The answer was just too quick, too calculated to reassure. The elderly woman stayed with Benny every step of the way, not letting her out of her sight. ‘I’ll come with you. Make sure you’re all right.’

Benny stood in the doorway to her room, not letting Emilia Winston past. ‘I’m all right, really. I just need a rest.’ She tried again to smile. ‘I am safe to be left, you know.’

Winston hesitated. ‘Well, if you’re sure.’

‘Of course. Thank you.’ Still the woman didn’t move, so Benny added: ‘You’re very kind.’ Then she closed the door on her.

Inside, Benny listened, ear against the door. She thought she heard footsteps, but could not be sure. So she waited a full two minutes before opening the door again. She did not try to open it a crack to peep out. She opened it wide, quickly, ‘Oh, by the way...’ she said, her voice at normal

volume, as if she expected to find someone in the corridor outside.

The corridor was empty. Benny grinned. 'Gotcha,' she murmured, and tiptoed back towards the main hub.

The images on the screens were similar, but not the same. The brains, the grey areas, were different shapes, different species. Braxiatel tapped one of the displays, the one showing the scan of Watkinson's brain.

'The same,' he said quietly.

Denson traced his finger along the dark spike that ran from the eyes to the middle of the brain in both pictures. 'Watkinson and Jason Kane, both.'

'So what is it?'

'What indeed?' Denson turned away from the screens. On the workbench behind him there were two bodies laid out, each covered by a pale green sheet. 'There is something else,' he said quietly. 'A suspicion, no more.'

Braxiatel joined him by the bodies. Denson drew back the sheet that covered Jason Kane. He was about to speak, but Braxiatel held up his hand.

'What was that?'

They stood silent and still for a moment. 'I heard nothing,' Denson whispered.

Braxiatel shrugged. 'Go on,' he said. 'It's nothing, I'm sure.'

Benny peered carefully round the door. She had managed to slip past the living area without Winston seeing her. The old woman was sitting there, staring into space. Obviously waiting to see if Benny came back. But Benny had managed to sneak past the door and out of the base. Then she had made her way carefully round to the hopper. Now she stood outside the prefabricated room that was the medical unit, straining to hear what was happening inside.

Her furtive peep round the door had afforded her a glimpse of Braxiatel and Denson inside, standing over Jason's body. They were talking quietly, as if afraid of being overheard.

She could make out odd words and phrases, but make no sense of them:

‘Does she know, do you think?’ Denson asked at one point.

Braxiatel’s answer was lost in the background hum of the ship. All she could hear was: ‘Don’t tell... good time... be sure...’

Denson mumbled something in reply.

Braxiatel’s reply to this was louder. ‘Maintaining the human form takes a huge amount of energy,’ he began before his voice tailed off again.

Benny pulled back, slowly, carefully, quietly. As she turned, she caught one last fragment of speech.

‘...keep a careful watch on her,’ Denson said... harm must come ...’

Then she slipped away.

Back in her room, a few minutes later, Benny jotted down what she had heard as best she could remember. There must be an innocent explanation, she thought. There must. ‘Harm must come,’ she read. Was that really harm, or ‘No harm must come...’? And to whom?

And if there was an innocent explanation, why had they not shared it with her? Why was Emilia Winston keeping watch on her, however inadequately? And what did Braxiatel mean about ‘maintaining the human form’? A dark suspicion was taking shape in her mind as she considered the possibilities. The few possibilities. One thing was for sure, she couldn’t ask Braxiatel or Denson. Or Emilia Winston come to that.

Clarence. She would ask Clarence, she decided. Perhaps he had noticed something odd. Or maybe he could tell her what was happening. Carefully, she opened her door a fraction again and looked out into the corridor.

Almost at once, the door was pushed open, knocking her backward. As if someone had been waiting outside her door, had seen it start to open and reacted automatically.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘That’s all right,’ Benny said, her mind reeling, as Clarence helped her to her feet.

'I was just coming to see how you are,' the angel said.

Alone in his room, Irving Braxiatel opened a drawer in the desk and took out a small metal strongbox. His thumbprint unlocked it and the lid sprang open. From inside he took six square metal plates and laid them out on top of the desk. Four in a row, the final two either side of the second plate along.

He stared at them for a while, organizing his thoughts, deciding what message he wanted to send. He was loath to do it, but he needed help. He had to know what had happened on Paracletes. Benny had been right, that was somehow the key. That could unlock the mysteries here. And they owed him a few favours, after all. Quite a few.

What he needed was someone to find out for him, to indulge in a little straightforward detective work on his behalf. And he knew just who to ask for. *They* wouldn't miss him, after all. They could afford to spare his services for a short while at least. If not for ever.

As the idea took shape, four of the metal plates slowly lifted as if by themselves, until they were standing on their edges around a fifth, forming a box. The final plate still lay on its back. Then slowly, gently, the last plate slid upward, over the box, forming a lid. For a moment the closed box was mill. Then, with a harsh, discordant scraping sound it was gone.

CHANGES

His first thought was that he had died and gone to heaven. It was not an unreasonable assumption.

One moment he was coughing his guts up, retching irradiated bile out of his raw throat. His eyes were almost closed by the blisters and tears were streaming painfully down the ragged flesh of his cheeks. He sank to his knees, still retching, wanting to bury his face in his hands but knowing that he could not cope with the pain. Even to touch his face now was agony.

Instead he ran his swollen fingers through what was left of his blond hair. Tufts of it pulled away from his dry scalp with the slight pressure. He was doubled over, bent in half with the effort. He had not drunk for three days, not eaten for longer than he could recall.

Just because it was easy, he toppled on to his side and lay moaning quietly on the ground. Above him, the sun shone in a clear blue sky. Somewhere in the distance a bird called out to its mate. The grass rippled in the light breeze and a few leaves fluttered down in spirals of golden brown. It was going to be a lovely day.

It took him a moment to realize that the cough was someone else's. He was so used to hearing his own hacking and choking. But this was deliberate, measured. Polite. Not the tortured radiation-burnt splutter of a man who was dying. Dying despite the promises, the hopes, the expectations.

'Radiation can be a bit of a problem for the process,' the monk said. 'Perhaps it would have been more considerate to warn you about that. Too late now, though. Sorry.' The monk watched him for a moment, or at least, the darkness beneath the monk's hood was pointed in Cwej's direction. 'It probably wasn't such a good idea to go back into the irradiated

zones after the first fatal doses. Thought it would hasten the process, did you?’

Chris Cwej stared in disbelief. And this was the moment, more or less, when the heaven thought occurred to him. No change of body then, no way out. No escape except death.

As if he had heard Cwej’s thoughts, the monk said: ‘No, no. You’re not dead. Not yet, anyway.’

He was not really a monk of course. Cwej knew who he was, or rather he knew who he was from. The figure was tall and lean, and wearing a long dark cloak. The hood of the cloak was pulled well over the head so that the man’s face was in shadow. Behind the hood an ornate collar stood up as if framing the portrait. If nothing else, it shaded Cwej from the sun.

‘What - what -’ Cwej’s throat was a mess. Dry and rotten. Trying to talk felt like swallowing knives.

‘What do I want?’ the monk asked. ‘To help of course.’ If he realized that the sound that croaked from the prone figure in front of him was a laugh he was polite enough to give no indication. ‘Of course,’ he went on, ‘it would be easier just to leave you to die. There are those who believe we won’t really be needing your help now, or anyone else’s come to that. Not in this universe of course.’

The monk took a step forward, and the sun burnt down on Cwej again. He hauled himself to his knees so that he could shield his eyes. So that he could follow the monk’s progress.

The monk was sitting on a small hillock now, his features still obscured. His voice was rich and deep. ‘But then there are those who believe we still need to be aware of what is going on. And there are even some,’ he leant forward slightly as if indulging in a slight indiscretion, ‘who think that since we made a promise we should keep it.’ He leant back again. ‘But of course, the people who think like that are the ones who haven’t made it to the top of the political totem pole. What do you think?’ He paused just long enough for Cwej not to be able to answer. ‘Not that it matters.’ The monk stood up again. ‘And anyway, the question is rather academic now.’

'You haven't said why you're here,' Cwej managed to grind out, almost coherently.

'True,' the monk conceded. 'Actually, someone was asking after you. By name.' He spread his arms in a gesture that suggested that this was incredible but nonetheless true 'A small matter. A little job that should not tax your abilities too much. A return to your roots in fact — a little detective work.'

Cwej's body was shaking now, racked with laughter that his larynx could not cope with. 'No chance.'

'Oh, we're willing to pay. The customer is quite influential. When he wants to be. And he was quite concerned when he heard how you were.' The monk folded his gloved hands inside his sleeves, so that his arms seemed to disappear into the folds of cloth. 'So what do you say? A new body in return for a few light duties. No personal risk involved, I promise. Though I gather you were told that last time, so you may wish to take my words with a pinch of salt.' He took a step closer to Cwej's kneeling form. 'Deal?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you should accept, but we do still believe in free will. It's the only way to predict behaviour after all.'

'When do I get the body?'

'Oh, the process has already begun. I could tell when I got here that there was some urgency so I took the liberty of assuming your acceptance. Free will or not. That's why your voice is improving, incidentally. We can give the process a small push, get the cells mutating. It will kick in properly soon, lots of repairs to take care of first.' He paused, as if thinking, then continued: 'We're aware of course of the, what shall we say, substances? Yes, substances that you've been taking to shape the end result. Not really in the spirit of the thing, I'm afraid. So I've negated any effects they might, have had. Good or bad. Rewritten the DNA strands to bring them back to humanity. You should be grateful for that at least.'

'Thanks,' Cwej ground out. He felt as if his whole body was turning itself inside-out, his innards bursting to be free of the constraints of his skin.

The monk, however, seemed oblivious to his writhing pain. 'Of course, you will look rather different,' he said, matter-of-factly. 'But I suppose you know that. After all, you're the one who used to look like a giant teddy bear, mid who hoped to become a hideous pan-dimensional war machine. So I guess we can assume you're not too picky.'

Cwej leant back on his haunches. He was feeling better, or at least less worse, now he considered. 'There's a bit of a difference between this and body-beppling,' he said, and he could hear the strength returning to his voice. He held up his hand, watching in a sort of satisfied astonishment as the blisters faded slowly away. His head was swimming, as if his skull was shrinking round his brain, the skin stretching and lightening over his scalp. As if from a distance, he could hear the monk talking again.

'Now then, your new employer would like you to go to Paracletes, which you may or may not know is in the Iribellum sector, part of the Cavanora system. There was a bit of trouble there with an archaeological expedition, and you are to take a look. I don't know quite what there is to see, it happened a while ago. And the planet's been quarantined ever since. Not that anyone would choose to go there, mind.'

'How long ago?' Cwej was having trouble speaking again. But this time it was because his teeth no longer seemed to fit his mouth.

'Eighty years.' The monk gave a short laugh. 'Blink of an eye, really. Anyway, get yourself there and have a look.' He leant closer again. 'Once you've finished the body thing, obviously.'

Things were getting hazy, blurred. Cwej could feel himself slipping away.

'Good.' The monk's voice was filtered through water. Indistinct. 'The process is really getting underway now. Your employer will be in touch once you get started.'

The monk leant over him, the dark hood looming close to Cwej. He felt something pressed into his palm.

'A communicator,' the monk said quietly. Then the hood seemed to fall over Cwej's face, blotting out his vision and

everything went black. His last thought was that he had seen inside the hood of the cloak, had seen that it was completely empty.

When he came round, he was lying on his back staring up at the bright blue sky. The sun no longer hurt his eyes and his throat felt normal again. He tested it as a thought occurred to him: 'Wait, come back. How do I get to Paracletes? Can you get me a ship?'

For a brief moment he had the impression of the monk floating transparently above him in the sky. The voice was quiet, distant. 'I can't be expected to think of everything for you,' the monk said. 'A new body I can get you no problem, but a ship...' There was a sound like a breath being sucked in, then silence.

When it was apparent that nothing more was going to be said, Cwej pulled himself to a sitting position. It seemed difficult somehow and he couldn't see his feet, he realized. With mounting disbelief and anger he hauled himself to his feet and stared down, pawed at his face desperately with a pudgy hand. 'What have you done?' he gasped. Then he was shouting: 'Come back, you bastard, come back here. What have you done? You've made me fat.' He looked around desperately, but there was no sign of the monk. 'And short,' he added pathetically.

The bleeping was coming from his left hand. He was still holding the communication cube the monk had given him, and Cwej flipped it on angrily. The front face of the cube faded into an image, an image that was somehow, impossibly, bigger than the edges of the square that enclosed it. The image was a man's face, thin and angular. The eyes were bright with an inner intelligence that Cwej knew all too well. They blinked.

'I'm sorry.' The voice was similar to the monk's, and it seemed to come from all around as the man on the cube spoke. 'I was expecting Chris Cwej.'

'Tall guy?' Cwej suggested. 'Broad, muscular, fit. Blond and arguably quite handsome? Easy mistake.'

The man on the cube nodded. 'You know him?'

Cwej raised an eyebrow. At least, it felt like he was raising an eyebrow, but he wasn't sure.

'Ah,' said Irving Braxiatel. 'I see. It seems there are some minor details which our mutual friends did not think it worth mentioning.'

'Mmmm,' said Cwej. 'You're telling me.'

His eyes were hard, his fists clenched, it may be unethical,' Braxiatel said, 'but I have to ask you something.'

'There is no shame in asking,' the Oracle replied.

'When Jason Kane first came here, when he stumbled upon you, did he ask a question before he came to find Benny?' There was silence for a while. 'I have to know,' Braxiatel said. 'If it was not important, I wouldn't ask.'

'I know.'

'Did he?'

A pause. The Oracle looked down at Braxiatel, her face impassive. 'He did,' she said at last. 'But do not ask me what his question was. There are laws that I cannot break even for' you.'

A faint smile crept across Braxiatel's face. His hands were relaxed now. 'But you can tell me,' he said quietly, 'what you replied.'

The Oracle's head turned slightly as she looked up, out across the temple. 'I spoke to him of how it would be,' she said, her voice quieter than usual, as if imparting a great secret or indiscretion, described the might-be and the may-be. I told him of the ending and beginning of everything, of worlds boiling away into the vortex, of the before during, after and never. I spoke of the impending war. And I answered him with the names of those on whose actions or inactions that future depends, those who by their decisions and indecisions determine what will come to pass.' She looked down again, fixing the tiny figure before her in her glowing gaze.

'My answer to his question was Bernice Summerfield,' she said. 'And it was Irving Braxiatel.'

There was a sound like a great sigh. Like a burden lifted.

Braxiatel turned to go. 'Thank you,' he breathed'

‘Is there nothing else you wish to ask me?’

Braxiatel frowned. There was a hint of emotion in the voice, a tinge of frustration almost. He shook his head. ‘Not at the moment.’

He had taken only two steps when the Oracle said: ‘That is how I answered Jason Kane.’

Braxiatel stopped, turned, wondering why she had offered this.

But before he could ask, the Oracle added: ‘Though, of course, he was not Jason Kane then.’

CONTACTS

He set to work at once, sending message after message from the console in his room. Asking, searching, hunting. He tried every possible address and nomenclature he could think of. He tried all known associates, and every place he knew of that was at all connected.

What was it she had said? She had mentioned someone called Mira. So he tried that too, putting a hunt-hound on the networks and letting it track back to source, to bring back all the references it could find. Then he began to sift through them one by one.

After three hours, Braxiatel thought he might have made contact.

She was imagining it. She had to be. She almost had herself convinced of it, almost believed that Clarence really had been concerned for her, not spying on her. If she behaved normally, perhaps they would too. Maybe it would all be all right. Maybe whatever was happening would stop happening.

Why did she care anyway? She was dying.

But she did care.

As she made her way along the corridor towards the living area, breathing heavily and holding the wall for support, she saw a flash of movement in the shadows. It startled her and she almost shrieked. But then Benny saw that it was a small furry shape, pressed back against the wall.

‘Wolsey,’ she said loudly in relief. ‘Where have you been, my friend?’ She knelt down, reaching out for the cat, anticipating its warmth, already feeling it nestling in to her as she held it tight.

But the cat was arching its back, edging away. Its teeth were bared as it hissed suddenly at her. A line of spittle shot across Benny's hand and she froze in surprise.

'What is it? Did someone frighten you?' She reached out again. it's all right now. I promise.'

For a moment Wolsey did not move. Then with blinding speed, the cat shot out a paw, before it turned and fled up the corridor with a yowl of annoyance.

Benny snatched her hand away with a cry. It was bleeding. He had scratched her. Wolsey had scratched her. She could see the thin parallel lines of red welling up along the back of her sore hand. She was almost in tears as she slowly resumed her journey along the corridor. 'Not you too, Wolsey,' she murmured. 'Not you as well.'

Denson and Winston were in the living area, each with a mug of coffee. They looked up abruptly as Benny came in, nursing her scratched hand.

Denson was immediately concerned. 'You've hurt yourself,' he said. 'Here, here - sit down a moment. I'll get a bandage.'

'It's nothing. Just a scratch.' She sat down anyway.

'At least let me bathe it.'

She nodded silently.

'What happened?' Emilia Winston asked.

'Wolsey,' she said, 'my cat...'

Denson was soon back, and Benny looked away as he dabbed at the back of her hand with a wet hand towel from the restroom.

'Can't trust cats,' Denson said. 'Are you sure you're OK? I can give you another sedative if you want? Something to help you sleep.'

Oh yes, she thought, you'd like that. That's the plan, is it? 'No thanks,' she said calmly.

'I have some tablets,' Winston offered. 'If you want -'

'No,' she said firmly. So, she was right about these two at least. 'Really, no.'

'If you're sure.'

Denson leant back. 'There. I doubt if it's infected, but keep an eye on it anyway.'

'Thanks.' Her hand was stinging where he had dab with the water.

If it was water.

Infected ...

'Thanks,' she said again, and almost ran from the room.

She held her hand under the cold tap for as long as she could stand the freezing torrent. The stinging seemed to have stopped now. Maybe she had managed to get the poison out. Or whatever it was. They seemed to want her drowsy, asleep, unable to think. Wolsey, Denson, Winston... She wasn't sure about Clarence, or Braxiatel. Maybe she had misunderstood them earlier, been too quick to jump to conclusions. About Clarence at least.

She knocked tentatively on his door. She wasn't even sure he'd be there.

But he was. The door swung open, and Clarence greeted her with a smile.

'What's wrong?' he asked as soon as she was in his room. 'You look terrible.'

She almost told him at once. But she had to be sure. Had to be certain. 'It's just, well, everything,' she said.

He nodded as if he understood. And handed her a glass of wine.

Benny smiled, raising the glass. 'Thank you.' But her smile froze before the glass reached her lips. 'You don't drink,' she said.

'No,' Clarence agreed with a smile. 'But I know that you do. It seems to help.' He nodded at the glass. 'Go on,' he said. 'You need it.'

She put the glass down carefully. 'No, thanks,' she said. 'It's a bit early in the day for me.'

He smiled back at her, as if that was fine. 'Water, perhaps?'

'No!' She made an effort to laugh it off. 'No, sorry. I'm not thirsty just now. Thank you.'

She stood up and looked round. 'Nice room,' she said. 'Really. But I have to be going, I'm sure you're busy.'

Clarence was frowning at her now. 'Go?'

'Yes. You know, leave. Absent myself.'

Clarence nodded slowly. 'You're sure you're all right?'

'Of course I'm sure. I'm fine.'

'Maybe you should see Denson,' he suggested, making it sound casual.

Benny's jaw dropped. 'Yeah,' she said at last. 'Thanks, maybe I will.'

She ran down the corridor, desperate to get away.

And collided with Denson coming the other way. 'I'm sorry,' he said, catching her arm to stop her falling. But he held on to it just too long for her liking, and Benny twisted away.

'No problem,' she said.

'I'd, er, I'd like to scan your brain again, Benny.'

'Oh?' She was backing away from him.

'Just routine, of course.'

'Of course. You didn't mention it before.'

'Didn't I?' He shifted guiltily on his feet. 'Well, actually I'd like to run a slightly different test. One I ran on Jason. On Watkinson too.'

'Why?' She was still backing away.

'Just a hunch. A thought. I'd, er, I'd need to put you out for a few minutes though. That's no problem, is it?' His hand was in his pocket. She could see the faint bulge of his jacket, guessed he had a hypodermic in there.

She didn't answer. She turned to run.

And found Winston standing behind her. Smiling. Her hand was in her jacket pocket too.

Benny pushed her roughly aside, saw her crash into the wall, heard her cry out in pain and surprise as she slid to the floor clutching her head. Benny didn't wait to see if the woman was all right, she sprinted along the corridor.

PARACLETES

Braxiatel had sent a medium-range space-chaser on autopilot to pick up Cwej and then take him on to Paracletes. It was the latest, fastest model hired through a blind company front on Krastis Magna and registered to a non-existent mining corporation in the Interstices of Lange. The journey had been impressively quick and boringly uneventful. The chaser had carefully ignored the warning beacons round the planet that said you did this at your peril.

Since there was nothing much else to do, Cwej had worked out an exercise routine which included sit-ups, press-ups and running on the spot. He was not, he had decided, actually fat. Stocky, more like. But he was not used to the new shape of his body and wanted to know what it was capable of, how strong, how supple he had become. Equally, he was not actually short. But he was shorter than he was used to, which was actually more unsettling than he had expected. Tables were just the wrong height, he stooped to go through doorways that were easily high enough. It was a pain, but he was getting used to it.

Even so, it was in something less positive than his best mood that Cwej emerged from the chaser on to the surface of the planet. The chaser had been keyed to the coordinates given in Watkinson's itinerary for the original expedition, which meant that the remains of the plexidome base the archaeologists had set up were within sight. The structure was covered with creepers and moss, almost absorbed back into the vegetation and landscape of the planet, but it was recognizable. It was with something approaching a feeling of return to normality that Cwej made his way through the undergrowth to the crime scene.

Near by the overgrown remains of some ancient dwelling - parts of several walls, the broken archway of a door - were

losing an age-old battle against the forces of nature. Probably the reason for the expedition coming here in the first place. But Cwej ignored the ruins and headed straight for the dome.

He paused in the doorway and looked inside before he disturbed the scene. The vegetation had not yet penetrated the dome to any great extent. The plexi-plastic shell was evidently strong enough to keep the plants out. Several creepers had grown in through the open door, and the floor was mottled and discoloured around the doorway. Moss was growing on most of the surfaces and a layer of grey dust covered everything. There were several foul-smelling puddles on the floor which suggested to Cwej's trained eyes and nose that there was animal life in the area. Hopefully, it wasn't hostile or huge since he was not yet sure how to handle his new body in a fight to the death. He had tried a few basic self-defence moves on the chaser and cricked his shoulder overreaching for a blocking move with his hands.

But everything is relative, Cwej mused as he looked over the bodies. At least he was still alive, and the body seemed fit and healthy enough.

'This shouldn't take long.' He was still surprised at the changed sound of his own voice. It was slightly deeper, more mellow than before. Cwej held up the communicator cube, letting it 'see' the scene. There was no image on the face of the cube, which meant that Braxiatel was not keyed into the comms net. He would pick up Cwej's message later rather than converse in real time. That probably made it easier, Cwej decided. No awkward questions to interrupt his work.

He made his way round the dome, ensuring the cube got a good view of everything, especially the bodies. One of them was cut open, the dry flesh folded back from the ribcage to expose the equally dry innards. He noticed as he passed that the master log was missing from the main system. Removed, he knew from their records, by the extraction team. After a quick once round he stopped in the doorway again.

'As you can see, they're all dead. Hardly a surprise since we knew that already. There should be another two bodies outside, but they'll be difficult to find, so I won't bother.

Records suggest they'll be much the same as the three in here. The rest are in the living quarters which are close by. I'll try those next. As it is, several immediately obvious questions, then. First, how come the bodies haven't decayed more? And second, given they haven't why hasn't anything eaten them?'

He went over to the nearest body and stooped down beside it. He set the cube down on the floor as he examined the corpse. It was a dry husk. 'Pretty well mummified. But the atmosphere is warm and damp, so that's not the reason. Explains why it's so well preserved though. This happened close to or at the time of death, which is obvious from the one over there which has been cut open. Presumably the post-mortem done by the extraction team. The state of the bodies means, I expect, that the animal life doesn't find this very edible. Well, it probably isn't. Not a test I'm about to try though.'

The living quarters had fared less well. They were overrun with creepers and vegetation. Cwej was able to force his considerable bulk through the doorway of one living unit, only to find the room beyond a mass of grass and shrubs. Another had a tree growing through the wall and the floor had been forced up by some dense plants that looked like thick vines.

Only two units were really accessible to the extent that Cwej could get inside and see any vestige of how it once was. But each yielded a prize.

In one of the units, there was a safe. The branch of a tree had somehow got inside, round the edge of the door and as it grew had forced the safe open. Inside was a slurry-like mess of damp, decaying paper and a holosphere. Cwej pocketed the sphere.

He found another holosphere in the second of the units, surface was cracked and discoloured, but it might give up its secrets. Since, like a holographic image, the whole of the data was reproduced throughout every part of the sphere, if he could resurrect one part of the sphere, he could get a copy

of the data. Whether that copy would be readable remained to be seen.

He was done in less than four hours and made his way back to the chaser, listening for sounds of animal life. But he heard nothing.

On the flight deck, Cwej slotted the damaged holosphere into the playback systems and ran a diagnosis. The data was corrupted, but some of it was still readable. The volume label indicated that the sphere was the personal journal of one Ableet Gorvalis, who Cwej knew from the personnel manifest was one of the archaeology students. The most useful data, then, would be at the end of the journal.

The other holosphere was not labelled. But from the plan of the living quarters, it had come from the unit allocated to Professor Edward Watkinson. And from what Braxiatel had told him, that meant it was relevant, whatever it was.

Cwej started with Watkinson's sphere, initially playing back the last few minutes of the recorded data. He watched the final recorded segment through twice without pausing it. Then he went through it again, almost sentence by sentence.

When he was done, he watched the fuzzy image from the other sphere, again just the final few minutes.

Then he uplinked the entire contents of both and sent them together with a recording of his findings by a high-speed encrypted carrier beam to Braxiatel. By then the chaser was already well on its way to its next destination. Just one more stop, one passenger to pick up.

PERSONAL JOURNAL OF PROFESSOR EDWARD WATHINSON (*EXTRACT*)

It's funny how one's attitudes and habits change. I locked my door last night. I never lock my door, not on an expedition anyway. The living quarters are secure, so what's the point? And if anything crops up then I need to be told. It's one of the ironies of our business that archaeologists are content to dig up remains that have lain hidden for centuries, millennia even, but need to know the moment anything interesting is unearthed. As if it couldn't keep till the morning.

Skorson has joined them now. I could see it in his eyes. A new tactic, that. They sent him to have a few drinks, talk over old times. Well, he's done the research all right. Whoever - whatever - he is. He knew it all. But I could tell. Too much righteous concern, too much sympathy, too much of the old matey-matey banter.

Then he came out with it, abandoned all pretence. Just wants to help, the same as the others. You can see it in their eyes, did I say that already? You can tell. It's there, lurking behind the facade, waiting to come out and get you. Get me.

Another death, too. While I was asleep as far as I can tell. They still can't get the comms system to work properly so we have to sit it out. Well, it's too late for the rest of them. I know that now. Even Skorson, for God's sake. When did it start, I wonder. I only noticed too late, when most of them were already gone. I think they knew I was a threat, that's why they singled me out, right from the start.

The last message may have got out. They'll send an extraction team. Not that there's anyone else left to extract. Only me.

Is the door locked? They'll be coming for me soon, I know. They'll give up the pretence now it's just me. Why bother with it? Why pretend to be trying to help?

Oh, my friends. My poor friends. What did I bring you
Into?

Extract ends.

PERSONAL JOURNAL OF ABLEET GORVALIS (*EXTRACT*)

The doc tried to reason with him when he first started having these

<< *Data missing or corrupted* >>

We all want to help, of course. But it isn't easy. He doesn't make it easy. And there's the comms problem to sort out.

God, I hope they get it sorted soon. Minks says he thought the last message got through, but there's no way of knowing until we can receive.

Crabtray died last night. Same as the others. No obvious cause. Same as all the others. Just sort of dried up.

Maybe he has a point. Lock yourself in and hope for extraction. I just hope

<< *Data missing or corrupted* >>

asked what was up. Couldn't believe it. Just shouted him down for asking. He was livid. Never seen anything like it. j

It must have got through. They'll be here soon. Get this thing sorted.

What? Got to go. Door. Coming!

Off now.

<< *Static and white noise* >>

BACKGROUND READING

As soon as she was inside the room, she slammed the door shut. She pointed at Joseph hovering in the corner, above the desk. 'You shut up,' she said sharply. 'Not a word, not a sound. And keep out of my way.' Then she pushed the bed up against the door, surprised at how easily she managed to move it. After that she piled everything she could move on top of the bed. Finally, she sat on what little space remained, breathing heavily. In the corner, Joseph hovered silently in exactly the same spot.

Her hand brushed against something lying beside her on the covers. It was the book, *Living Archaeology*. She picked it up. She had no idea what to do now. She was barricaded inside a room with no other way out. Outside most if not all of her friends were possessed by... something. If they were really her friends, not some alien shape-changing form.

Even Clarence. Even Wolsey. Braxiatel? Probably. But if not, how could she warn him, get a message to him? And if he was already one of them, that would just warn them that she knew. Though they would guess that soon enough if they hadn't already.

The book was heavy in her hand. She stared at the bland cover. Just words, no design, no picture. The image of the husk of Watkinson's body emerging from the sand rose in her mind, and again she was struck by the similarity of his fate and hers. Only he had been racing to save his friend, not desperate to escape from him. Even so...

She opened the book and leafed through until she found what she was looking for. How had he coped with those last few days, especially after the trauma of whatever happen on Paracletes? How had he coped with knowing he would be too late, that he might himself never return?

Here it was - a transcript of Watkinson's final lecture
Someone knocked softly at the door, tried to open it. Benny
ignored them. They could wait. She was busy. She was
reading.

TRANSCRIPT OF WATHINSON'S FINAL LECTURE (*EXTRACT*)

S... So why archaeology, we may well ask. What's the point? After all, what's dead is dead and poking about in bone pits and mass graves will hardly bring back the past, will it?

But that, of course, is not the point. In fact, living only for the past, looking only for the answers within the history is not what we should be about. In fact, while I bang on at you at every opportunity about the importance of preserving and appreciating the context, it is by taking our findings out of context that they acquire value.

Yes, that shocked you, didn't it? Well, not you, Ursular, because you're not listening. Yes, you.

But the point, surely, is that what we learn about the past is irrelevant, useless even, unless we can apply that knowledge to the present. Unless we can use that knowledge to inform and shape our actions, words, deeds, friendships and relationships *today*.

It works both ways, of course. There are indeed some universal truths, and while it's taken me all my life to realize what they actually are you can rest assured that I shall share them with you in a moment. But given that there are such truths, we can equally well apply what we know about the present - about how we live, think, feel - to the past. We do this all the time. We know, for instance, that if we unearth a drinking vessel from the remains of a society that has broadly speaking equivalent carbon-based shortcomings and needs as our own, then it's a pretty safe bet that said drinking vessel was made to be drunk from. Equally, we can determine to a degree why things happened by looking within ourselves and questioning and understanding our own motivations.

And if you were paying attention up there at the back yes, you, Fostem - you would realize that I just said that exactly the opposite happened. And the cleverer among us might even realize that this is not a time for mutual exclusivity and that both these things are true. The past, as we uncover and understand it, informs our beliefs, motives, 1 feelings now. And those beliefs, motives, feelings - our whole value system, if you will - is the bedrock on which we build our understanding of the past. Which in turn, et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum.

In short, a perpetual loop. Or to put it another way, when I said just now that we need to take things out of context, what we actually need to do is to realize that across the ages then is but one single context. Everything has its place, fits into the same universal pattern. It's just that being a part of the pattern ourselves we cannot readily perceive it as such. Living archaeology. Perhaps that should be my epitaph.

As we make our own history, then, what are these continuing, driving forces? What is this context that remains constant and unyielding? I believe it is all to do with motivation, with an understanding of the things that drive us. And the three principal driving forces are these:

The first constant is, I believe, friendship. In many ways this transcends the other two. What does it profit a man if he gains the world but loses his friend? What indeed, apart obviously from the world. But who will he share it with?

The second is survival. That much is perhaps obvious to everyone. Every action we take is with the basic understanding that We (with a capital 'W') need to survive. Unless we survive, all else is irrelevant. What good is, well, anything if you're dead or your race has just become extinct?

The third constant, then, and this is perhaps the hardest for any of us to come to terms with, is revenge. There is a need within us all, I would suggest, to apportion blame. And having done that, to exact retribution.

Please note, by the way, that I am speaking still with that capital 'W'. I am giving you my opinion of the most extensive driving forces behind the instinctive behaviour of intelligent

species. This is not intended as a personal manifesto or an instruction set for how you should approach your next seminar.

But an understanding of these basic drives can help you to assimilate the information you will uncover in the course of your studies, of your lives. And it can help you put it into context.

But finally, let me leave you with this one other piece of advice. Whatever you strive to do in life, wherever you want to get to, always remember this: it's not who you know, it's *whom* you know.

Which I suppose brings us back to friendship.

There is a story that the great archaeologist Bemsteiner was once asked by a student why he had interpreted a particular fact in a particular way. Bemsteiner replied: 'I made it up.'

Now, this may seem to trivialize the science of archaeology, but that is in effect what we do. We take established facts, or discover new ones, and then we make up a story to explain them. We call this story a 'theory' but it is still a story. And sometimes different archaeologists have different theories. In other words, they make up their own different stories.

I mention this because a while ago, when I spoke to you in the stead of Dr Mikelz, I scorned his reliance on legend as a valid archaeological or historical source. I wish now to retract that scorn. In fact, I wish to endorse Dr Mikelz's work in this area. Let us not forget, those of us who ever took the trouble to find out, at least, that the term archaeology means, literally translated, *the study of the ancient*. And let us also be aware that the first so-called archaeologists were actually players who enacted ancient legends in front of an appreciative audience. They gave their own stories of past events based on the available evidence.

How far we have come since then.

Extract ends.

OBSERVATIONS AND ARRIVALS

The camera was close on the pages of the book as Benny read. It tracked with her. Braxiatel read every sentence carefully, trying to understand what she was seeing in it, how she might react.

When Benny closed the book, Braxiatel opened a secondary pane on the display, and replayed the recording, reading the lecture again. Three basic drives, Watkinson had said, three points that defined the context in which to interpret everything that was happening here: friendship; survival; revenge.

He sat back, swinging gently to and fro in the chair. Watkinson knew. Or rather, had known. That was why he had followed Mikelz. He must have known Mikelz would be dead, but he put his friendship over his own survival. Or maybe he was already acutely aware of his own mortality. After Paracletes.

And when he left, shortly after delivering that final lecture, it was with thoughts of revenge as well as friendship.

With a sudden movement, Braxiatel leant forward. He called up Cwej's report again, reread that too. Then he snapped his fingers, as if everything had clicked perfectly into place. He needed confirmation, of course. But that was simple enough to get. He picked up his jacket and made his way out of the base, starting the steep walk up to the temple.

In just over an hour, Braxiatel was back in his room. He went over the facts again and again in his mind, searching for a way out, for a course of action.

He looked up, startled at the knock on the door. 'Yes?'

It was Denson. 'She's still locked in her room,' he said, 'barricaded herself in. Won't answer when we call.'

Braxiatel nodded. 'She's afraid of you,' he said. 'And with good reason. I think we should have a little chat.'

They had given up calling out to her now. But Benny knew they were still there. Waiting for her. She would have to come out some time, they knew that. Benny knew that too. It was strange, she mused. The fact that she knew she had only a week or two to live had focused her mind, had made her appreciate the little time she did have. And she was damned if she was going to give them the satisfaction of cutting her brief life even shorter just to suit their purposes.

Braxiatel was sitting stiffly at his desk. Denson was standing beside him as together they watched Benny pace up and down in her room.

'Do you think she suspects?' Denson asked. 'Knows, even?'

'I don't think so. Let's just hope she doesn't do anything precipitative.'

They both turned as a figure appeared in the doorway. It was Winston.

'I've left Clarence outside her room,' she said. 'In case she comes out. But I thought you should know, a ship's arriving.'

The sound of the ship landing had been muffled by the walls of the room, but distinct. Benny recognized at once the characteristic flare of the exhaust pods as they fired to slow the descent. Friends? Or reinforcements? She climbed over the bed and balanced precariously among the furniture she had piled on it, listening at the door.

For a long while there was nothing. Then she thought that in the distance she could hear talking, discussion, argument. Then nothing again. Silence.

The knock at the door was so sudden, so unexpected that despite it being relatively quiet, Benny almost fell off the bed. She managed to catch her balance, calling out in surprise, despite herself: 'What? Who is it?'

'Benny?'

She laughed. 'And who else might this be?'

'Benny,' the voice said, 'please, it's me.' There was something odd about the voice, it did not sound like any of them - it certainly wasn't Winston, it was a male voice. But not Braxiatel, or Clarence, or Denson. 'It's me,' the voice said again, low, quiet, restrained. 'Chris Cwej.'

She did lose her balance now, grabbing at an upturned chair for support and managing to slip off the side of the bed and remain standing. Cwej? Here?

'Benny, please,' the voice said again. 'Let me in, will you? There's nobody else out here now, I promise you.'

Cwej. And he had managed to fight them off somehow. He had arrived in the ship.

Before she knew it she was dragging the bed back from the door. She paused as her hand reached out for the handle. How did she know it was really him? But then again, she couldn't stay in here for ever. Time to take a chance.

She opened the door the tiniest crack and peered out into the corridor. She saw the figure standing there, close to the door, and gave a gasp of surprise. Then she slammed the door shut.

But not quite quick enough. The man outside was pushing it open again, knocking her back into the room. 'Let me in, Benny,' he was calling. 'Benny, you have to let me in. It's me, Chris.'

But it wasn't. The door snapped open as she fell back, tried to get up, pushed herself away from him on her back, crawled to the corner of the room and curled up, hardly daring to look out of her foetal cocoon. 'What are you?' she hissed as the man approached.

He reached out towards her. 'Benny, it's me,' he said again.

She shook her head. She was shivering now. 'No,' she shouted, 'get away from me.'

'Benny, please.' He took a step closer.

She was getting back some control now, managing to think more clearly. 'You should have done your research a bit better,' she said. 'Cwej is tall, blond, slim. He's not at all like you.' She pulled herself to her feet, looking round for a

weapon - anything. But almost everything was piled on the bed. And the bed was behind the short, plump man who was reaching out towards her.

There was a chance, just a chance, to get round him, make it to the door. She took it, flinging herself sideways, running.

He was slow to realize what she was doing. But not so slow he didn't grab her flailing wrist as she passed him. His grip was strong, and he dragged her back, almost lifting her off her feet. Her face was close to his now as she struggled to pull free. He was not much taller than her.

'I'm sorry, Benny.'

'So am I,' she hissed at him.

'It is me, really. I've... changed.'

'I'll say, shorty.'

He seemed genuinely upset by this, and his grip weakened for a moment. Enough for her to pull free. But he was between her and the door again. His eyes had hardened. He watched her carefully as he slowly approached. 'Benny, you're ill.' His voice was quiet, almost threateningly quiet as he took another cautious step towards her, as if she were a dangerous caged animal. 'Let us help you. We want to help you.' He reached out towards her. 'Really we do. This paranoia, these delusions. What you've done - it's driven you insane. Nobody wants to hurt you.'

She almost laughed at that, stared back at him incredulously.

'We're your friends.'

She did laugh now. She scooped up a pile of the papers that were strewn across the floor, and hurled them at him. A snowstorm of research material. She ran at the blizzard, pushed through. She could feel him reaching for her, grabbing, pulling.

But she broke free and ran.

She grabbed the door frame as she reached it, used it to pull herself round in an arc, to propel herself up the corridor. But they were there, waiting for her. She tried to stop, skidded on the floor, slipped, slammed to the ground.

A hand took her by the arm, helped her up. It was not a painful grip, but it was firm. It would brook no struggle.

She looked up as she rose to her feet and almost stumbled again.

‘Oh my God,’ she whispered as she looked into his face. ‘Jason.’

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

The problem with information was not that it wasn't available. It was knowing where to look. It took a while, but B-Aaron had eventually discovered that true to His open government policies, God made the results of all simulations available to the Behavioural Analysis Interest Group. B-Aaron had heard of B AIG, but he had never had any inclination to get involved in the level of detail about People's (and even people's) behaviour that they were reputed to indulge in. Until now.

From trolling through the databases and communications logs he managed to get a digest of some of the simulations God had run on Jason Kane. He cross-referenced Bernice Summerfield and started with the monthly highlights file. If nothing else, it would set the scene and provide some anecdotal background.

In fact, it yielded a discussion on the minutiae of Kane's behavioural differences when with Benny as opposed to when he was alone. With typical attention to detail, B-Aaron decided, the BAIG had completely missed the point.

It took him several hours of analysis of all the scenarios before he could be sure himself quite what the point actually was. Along the way he stumbled across a playback log which gave the name of the House where Jason Kane had viewed many of the simulations of himself. Another route to investigate, and he filed the data away for later use.

The point seemed to be that the nature of the simulations changed. The data had been released to BAIG in a strange order. It was not chronological, and it took B-Aaron several seconds to reorganize the data. It took him a few more tail discover that nobody else had ever bothered to do this. And it took almost three seconds to see the split.

The actual scripts for the simulations were not something that God always released. It was instructive, not to say suspicious, that none of the full scripts for the Summerfield/Kane sims were available. But what was obvious nonetheless was the change in emphasis. Up to a certain point the simulations involved primarily Bernice Summerfield and sometimes Jason Kane. After that point they still involved Benny, but the emphasis was very much on Kane. The only output data evaluated or quantified was from Kane. The only official analysis (meaning it was done by Zeb'Lan under God's auspices) concerned Kane. The only interest, therefore, would seem to be in Kane.

And whereas the earlier sims were extremely specific in terms of the input parameters, the later ones were strikingly lax in their definition.

With a bit more digging and the careful application of a qualitative analysis engine, B-Aaron was able to make some useful deductions. First, the initial scenarios were all concerned with Jason Kane persuading Benny to go somewhere or do something. Second, those same sims had been rerun substituting other models. It was somewhat unnerving for B-Aaron, who was not used to being unnerved which rather added to the feeling, to discover that he was one of the substitute models. It was not every day that one discovered that God was running detailed and sophisticated hypotheses to predict one's behaviour. Others whose behaviour He seemed to be modelling included !Cin-ta!x, Clarence, and someone called Sara!qava! There were others too.

But the outcome seemed to be that only Kane would do, for only he provoked what seemed to be the correct response in Benny's simulated person. And from the point when that conclusion was mathematically apparent, the simulations switched to focus on Kane. But not on detailed aspects of his behaviour, rather on generalities, traits, and habits. His wont-to-do's rather than his specific responses to given socio-linguistic stimuli.

To hang around inside the data for much longer, B-Aaron knew, would be to invite comment. So he blind-copied the relevant summary information into an enciphered message. Then, just in case, and to show he had been doing his job rather than just culling data, he set down the conclusions he had come to.

Then he gave the message an ident and summary that made it look to anyone snooping like it was the minutes of an especially tedious meeting of the Boring and Irrelevant Interest Group, and sent the whole lot to Clarence.

IDENTITY CRISIS

It looked exactly like him, but she knew it wasn't really Jason. She could not look him in the face without recalling the image of him leaning towards her, his eyes glazing, his skin ageing before her mind's eye as she pounded the lamp into the back of his head again and again. It was a good likeness, though. Better than Cwej, that was for sure. He even had the wit and the dangerous spark in his eyes.

He held her tight by the arm as they marched her along to the living area. They were all there now - Braxiatel, Denson, Clarence and Winston. And Jason, and the man who said he was Cwej. They arranged their chairs in front of her, made it look like a cosy evening fireside chat as they watched her carefully. As they spoke calmly, reasonably, told her she was ill. Told her they had to put her out and do some tests. For her own good.

But why did they need her approval, she wondered, as she bit her lip and refused to answer. It was like when they first arrived, everyone lined up to look at the Oracle. But now they were looking at her. What did they want from her? What did they *really* want?

'We won't know, not for sure, what's wrong, unless I can do those tests I mentioned,' Denson said. He was leaning forward in his chair, his forced smile full of sympathy.

'And that means putting me out?' Benny said, injections, gas, Vulcan nerve pinch?' She glanced at Jason. 'Blow on the head, whatever.'

'Please, Benny,' Clarence said quietly, it's -'

'For my own good. Yeah, I got that bit.'

'What are you afraid of, Benny?' The one that looked and sounded like Jason asked her.

'Oh, you mean since I'm dying anyway, what's wrong with going now? Making an early exit from this world and

rolling up ahead of time at the Pearly Gates. Well, maybe St Peter's not ready for that yet. And maybe I'm not.'

She looked round at them, thumping her fist into her knee in time to her words. 'I want to live.' She took a deep breath, could feel the emotion welling up inside her again, the constriction in her throat, the stinging behind the eyes. 'I want to live,' she said again, her voice barely more than a murmur.

'Oh, Benny.' Jason stood up, walked over to her. He reached out to put his arm round her. And she almost let him, just for a moment. Then she pulled suddenly away, sending her chair skidding across the floor as she stood up.

'Oh, very clever, hypodermic up the sleeve, is it?' She backed away from them. They had made a mistake now; she was close to the door, could get out, just possibly could get out. 'I wouldn't want your sympathy anyway,' she spat, shaking her head in contempt.

'Please, Benny...' Jason wiped his eye, a simple, quick gesture. But enough to distract the others for a split second.

She was through the door before any of them had moved. She slammed it shut, spent a brief moment looking for a bolt or lock that wasn't there, then ran for the main exit.

'Damn,' said Jason.

'She can't go far,' Winston said.

'Can't she?' Braxiatel turned to Cwej. 'Did you lock your ship?'

He nodded. 'Oh yes. She can't get in. Is your ship secure?'

'I sealed the hatches myself when I came over from the medical unit,' Denson reassured them. 'She won't get in there. She's trapped here.'

'Well, that's something,' Braxiatel said quietly.

'So what now?' Clarence asked. 'We'll never find her in the dark, and night's almost here.'

'Oh yes we will.' Braxiatel smiled, a thin, almost sad smile. 'We can use the satellites to get a heat trace. It will be more pronounced in the cold of the night. We can track her every move. Go straight to her.'

‘And what then?’ Jason asked.

It was Denson who answered. His voice was low, grim. ‘We can’t let her get away from us again,’ he said. ‘I’ll get the guns.’

The ship was sealed. She had known it would be, they were taking no chances. Benny’s only consolation was that night was falling, the shadows of the temple columns stretching out into the encroaching darkness. That would make it harder for them to find her.

Without really considering, she headed for the temple. There was something comforting about the thought of using that as her safe haven, her sanctuary, rather than heading off into the sandy wastes and looking for a hole to hide in. Also, it was such an obvious focal point that with any luck at all it would be the last place they would look. If she was going to die, at least it would be somewhere impressive. And in good company, she decided, thinking of the others they had found there or near by. Garshal and Follett, Mikelz and his wife and friend. And Edward Watkinson, who as much as anyone living or dead was her hero. Her role model.

She settled down beside one of the massive pillars and looked round. She had a good view down at the survey base, would see them coming for her. She wondered why they hadn’t already. Maybe there was no rush. They knew she wasn’t going anywhere. They could wait for daylight.

If she turned slightly she could see the Oracle, seated impressively, beautifully, almost majestically at the end of her temple.

Or maybe they wouldn’t bother. Perhaps they just wanted her out of the way. Perhaps they would just leave her out there until she died, as they knew she would.

But as she sat there, as the cold of the stone floor froze its way through her jeans and she began to feel numb, a thought occurred to her. A hope, a chance.

What if they had been lying? What if Denson was not Denson when he diagnosed her illness? Physically, she had

never felt better, she was sure. What if there was nothing wrong with her?

But then she recalled the words of the Oracle, the first diagnosis. Had she lied too? Could she lie? Or was there another interpretation of her words, as Braxiatel had suggested.

Her thoughts were cut short as she saw movement down by the survey base. Several small figures were emerging from the main doors. She could tell Jason's walk, knew it well. The others she wasn't sure about, though she could detect Clarence's distinctive shape through the gloom. She counted them. One missing, one person still inside. Either Denson or Braxiatel she guessed. She was fairly sure one of the figures below was Winston.

She watched as they made their way across the sand, walking together, not fanning out or searching the area round the base. It was as if they knew exactly where they were going. And they were heading up the slope now - straight for the temple. She watched for a while, wondering if they would separate, would start searching for her. But they didn't.

Then it occurred to her - the satellites. They were tracking her body heat, just as Garshal had searched for other life forms after Follett's death. They weren't looking for her because they already knew exactly where she was.

They were close enough now that she could see that Denson was the leading figure as they struggled up the slope. He was holding something, a GPS tracker - locked on to her? So that meant that someone, Braxiatel it looked like, was back at the base keying the satellites to her, ensuring she wasn't lost as they circled the planetoid, switching the GPS from one satellite to another as they orbited.

She could run. But she couldn't keep running, not for ever. And this tiny world was so small some of them could circle round the other way and meet her in a few hours. She could get back to the base, somehow stop Braxiatel keying the satellites, wreck the equipment. But they would know where she was going, he would know she was coming.

She needed to decide soon. They were getting to the top of the slope. She could see them clearly in the starlight now that her eyes had adjusted and they were so close. And she could see why they were finding the climb so awkward. She could see the handguns they were carrying.

Braxiatel switched to another satellite as the first dropped below the horizon. She had started to move now, had probably guessed they knew where she was. He had half expect she would run back towards the base, would try to stop satellites and get away again before her pursuers caught up with her. He had a handgun ready, on the desk in front of him beside the console. But she was running in the other direction, away from the base.

He frowned and called up a daytime image of the area. What was out there that she might be heading towards? He knew her well enough now to realize it was not just flight for the sake of it.

His finger traced across the image, following her path extending it. There, that was it. Mikelz's base camp. Now what would she be after there? They had surveyed it enough to know there were no weapons, no equipment sophisticated enough to offline the satellites or jam the communications to them. Just the essentials for survival, really. Food, water, light and heat.

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. He could see what she was planning now. He opened a channel to Denson, to warn him. This was going to be harder than he had hoped.

IN THE HOUSE OF GOD

It was not far from Zeb'Lan's amphitheatre. Too far to walk, of course, but close enough for B-Aaron's drone to make the journey to the House in a couple of minutes. No doubt Kane had been provided with transport between the two.

It seemed closed up, as if the occupants had gone away for an extended vacation and left the amenities disconnected and a note with the neighbours to look in about once a month. If they could be bothered.

The drone made its wary way round the entire outside of the House before it returned to the main door and tapped gently on it. Immediately the lights inside the House came on and the door opened. B-Aaron pushed his way inside.

'My, this is an honour,' the House said. 'A visit from a real Very Aggressive Ship. Looking for a home from home?'

'Not occupied at the moment?' B-Aaron asked, transmitting his ident codes along a secondary frequency.

The House replied that it was called Yahlwey, and that, no, it was empty right now. 'Let me get the dust out, have a general tidy. Usually God sends some visitor over at quite short notice. Did He send you, by the way?'

'No,' B-Aaron admitted. 'I was just passing. Thought I'd drop in.'

'Feel free. Have a mooch round. Tell me what you think of the decor.'

B-Aaron did. He checked each room carefully, sensors on fine-grain sweep, trying to make it look like he was only mildly interested. 'I gather a friend of mine stayed with you recently,' he said when it was apparent there was no material evidence to be found. 'Acquaintance, rather. Name of Kane.'

There was silence for a while. B-Aaron wondered if perhaps he'd stepped too far too fast. Just to be sure, he had the drone check its shielding. Sure enough, the stealth systems

were all online and giving the right answers to the integrity check he ran. Nobody outside the House would be able to hear them. Not even God.

‘Never had a Kane, I’m afraid. The last person who visited was called Kebara,’ Yah!wey said at last. ‘That’s person with a very small “p” if you want my opinion. Not interested in most of my facilities. Didn’t comment on the new colour scheme. Just sat there.’ A spotlight came on over an armchair in one corner of the main room. ‘Well, there, to be exact.’

B-Aaron’s analysis routines were already suggesting there was nothing to be learnt here. Maybe God had wiped the House’s memory? Anything was possible. ‘Really,’ he said. ‘Well, as I was saying, just thought I’d look in. Check the new decor.’

‘No problem,’ the House said. The main door slid open again to let the drone out. ‘Stop by any time.’ B-Aaron was on the threshold as the House added: ‘Just don’t sit in a corner and watch sims non-stop if you do pop round, will you?’

The drone froze. Or rather, it hovered in a stationary position in the doorway. Slowly, very slowly, it swung round so that the facial icon was facing back into the room. ‘Sims?’ B-Aaron said. ‘Non-stop simulations?’

‘That’s right. That’s all he seemed to want to do. That and adjust his external appearance, of course. But then shape-shifters are like that I suppose.’

‘And we are talking about...?’ B-Aaron let the question hang beside him in the air.

‘Kebara. Like I said.’

B-Aaron considered for something under a second before deciding to go for broke. ‘So why do you think he was here?’ he asked.

‘Search me,’ the House said. ‘Oh, but you already have. I was forgetting.’

‘What did he look like?’

Yah!wey gave a dry laugh. ‘Whatever he liked. Withered old husk when he arrived. I think he was actually quite old.

But then he settled on a younger male persona. Scruffy, no dress sense. Typical shape-shifter, or so I'm led to believe. Didn't fit in with the colours here at all, no aesthetic sensibilities whatsoever if you ask me. That was when he started on the sims.'

'What did he do before that?'

'Oh, the first time, before he went away, he just chatted with God.'

'God was here?'

'Oh no. Direct link, none of your remote drone nonsense or standard communications frequencies. No offence, but a tight-beam direct comms link is rather more efficient for these lengthy discussions.'

B-Aaron did a quick tour of the room. 'I don't suppose...' he began slowly.

'Oh, I don't listen,' the House cut in quickly. 'Oh dear me no. That wouldn't do.' There was a slight pause while the lighting changed, became more moody. 'But it was all to do with the problems !Cin-ta!x is having with his temporal physics. God was sending this Kebara off to find out about something called Oracle Technology. Thought it could help. Had a question to put to some Oracle apparently.'

'Sending him?' B-Aaron was rapidly reassigning some of his processing systems to assess the information he was suddenly getting.

'He went away for a while. Then he came back,' Yah!wey said simply. 'Been to KS-159, whatever that is, and found this Oracle thing. Report back to God on how it went. Then straight into the simulations.'

'You hear a lot for someone who doesn't listen.'

The House shrugged this off. 'All communication is routed through my systems. I don't have to listen to know what was said.'

Several of B-Aaron's processing subsystems were suggesting similar lines of enquiry now. The part of him that assessed the level of danger inherent in a given situation was also calling for attention. The ship ignored it in favour of the

obvious line: 'And what,' he asked, 'was the question that Kebara put to the Oracle?'

'What else?' the House said. 'What are we all asking ourselves these days? Who will win the war when it comes?'

'And the answer?' B-Aaron's voice had become almost a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard.

'Cryptic. It depends, apparently, on who makes the most informed decisions and understands the importance of the key players and how to manipulate them. How to involve' them or not.'

B-Aaron's assessment systems were hotlining now. The inherent danger signals were also screaming for attention. 'So Kebara, the shape-shifter, took the form of one of these key players, one of the people God needs to control?'

'You know,' said the House, 'for something so clever, you do seem strangely unable to grasp the point.' The lighting was quite dim now. A spotlight came on, a single perfect circle of yellow light against the wall opposite B-Aaron. 'It's not Jason Kane who is so vital to the outcome of the war. It's Benny and Braxiatel that we have to keep occupied.'

B-Aaron stared at the spotlight. A face had formed in the centre of it. A smiley face - dots for eyes, short vertical line for a nose, long curled line for the mouth. 'I think,' God said, 'that it's time you and I had a little talk.'

CONFRONTATION

Mikelz's base was in turmoil, exactly as they had left it. Things were strewn across the floor, papers everywhere. Papers. Benny scooped up handfuls, filled a plastic crate with as much as she could lift. Then she hunted round for the other things she needed. She had no idea how long she had, but the quicker she got this done the better.

She dragged the crate outside, so that the satellites would get a really good image of it. In the distance she thought she could just make out the movement of tiny figures on the skyline, but it might have been her imagination.

She scattered paper all around, screwing it into balls, building a pyramid of them over the crate, filling the crate. Then she dragged out a wooden workbench and laid that down beside the pile of paper. She was working quickly, frantically, sweating like she had run a marathon. In fact, she felt like she had run a marathon, breath coming in short hard gasps, and she reached for a lighter.

The lighters were old-fashioned and reliable. Even after eighty years she was sure they would work. Almost sure. She crossed her fingers and tore the ignition strip off the first. The friction from the movement of the strip as it ripped away was easily enough to ignite the combustible material inside, and a tiny flame licked over the rim of the lighter, like a night-light. She dropped it carefully into the crate and reached for another.

She did not wait for the blaze to really get going, but set off at a run. She headed away from where she might have seen the figures, away from the temple. And away from the direction she really wanted to go.

* * *

The tiny red and orange figure on the screen was visible running away from the base. Just for a moment, as the area

outside the base flared brilliant yellow. As the fire caught, the whole screen flared orange and red. Whiteout.

Braxiatel shut off the console. Even when the fire was out there would be residual heat that would confuse readings in that immediate area. And they would have to start from scratch and hope to acquire the target - to find Benny. And meanwhile she could have buried herself in the sand, or entered a building. Anything.

He drummed his fingers on the surface of the desk in annoyance, thinking. Then he picked up the gun, feeling its weight in his hand for a moment before pushing it into his jacket pocket.

There was no way to be certain of how successful her plan had been. But Benny watched them trying desperately to put out the fire - throwing crates of sand at it from as close as they could get. That suggested to her that the satellites were blind. For a while at least. For the local area at least. The question was, how far could she move before they picked her up again, if they ever did?

Not that she had a lot of choice, she thought as she jogged back towards the base. The sand was sliding under her feet, making the journey all the more tiring. But she was almost there now; just a few more minutes and she would have some answers. She hoped.

The living area was silent, the lights out. She made her way carefully, quietly, along the spine corridor towards Braxiatel's room, feeling her way along the wall. She could see the thin strip of light under his door, knew he was in there.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside. He was sitting at his desk and the chair swung round as she entered.

'Hi,' she said lightly.

'Hello,' he replied. 'I guessed you might come here.' He waved to a spare chair. 'Why not take a seat?'

'No thanks. I prefer to stand.'

‘As you wish.’ He was resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, tapping the fingertips of one hand against the fingertips of the other.

‘The likeness is really very good,’ Benny said, taking a cautious step closer. ‘You’ve got it exactly right.’

He looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled suddenly. ‘You think I’m someone else, don’t you?’ he said. He sounded slightly amused. ‘That I’m not *me*.’

‘Convince me otherwise.’

‘All right. Ask me something. Anything. Something only I would know. The real me, that is, not an ersatz version.’

She watched him closely, and thought for a moment. ‘You own a collection. A big collection.’

He frowned. ‘I hope you aren’t going to ask me to recite that catalogue I gave you.’

‘You know about that, then?’

‘A lucky guess,’ he said sarcastically. ‘Of course I know. I remember.’

‘There’s a play in your collection. You don’t know that I know you have it, so this is a good test.’ Behind her back, she crossed her fingers. It was just possible that he didn’t yet own it at all, in which case a wrong answer was no indication of guilt, it’s a rare piece, unique even. Much sought after.’

He regarded her with an amused expression. ‘That could cover a number of plays I have manuscripts for. *Love’s Labours Won*ne, for example is -’

‘Ah,’ Benny interrupted, ‘but the thing about this one is that while it has quite a reputation, you and I know that it’s actually not very good.’ She smiled at him. ‘Is it?’

He folded his arms and tilted his head slightly to one side. ‘Maybe I should ask you,’ he said, ‘how you know I possess the only copy - the original manuscript at that - for Osterling’s *The Good Soldiers*.’ He paused, watching her. When she said nothing he added: it came into my possession in my capacity as Custodian of the Library of St John the Beheaded. Convinced yet?’

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘But even if that means you really are Irving Braxiatel -’

‘Which of course I am.’

‘Even if you are,’ she went on, ‘you’ve been taken over in some way rather than replaced. Turned against me.’

He sighed and folded his arms. ‘Listen to yourself, Benny. Just step back a moment and think about it. It’s not me, not any of us. It’s you, Benny. You’re the one who’s changed. Who’s ill. Who needs help.’

She just stared at him.

‘Can’t you see what’s happening to you?’ he said, his expression was pained, his voice pleading. Very convincing. ‘You’re not thinking straight, it’s you that’s out of character, that’s been taken over. Not me. Not us. What motive could we have? What could we be trying to do to you, Benny?’

‘That’s very good,’ she said sadly. ‘Very good indeed. But I overheard you. You and Denson in the medical unit, talking about harming me.’

‘No, no, no.’ He shook his head. ‘We were discussing how to help you without you coming to harm.’

‘Since you tell me I’m dying anyway, that’s a bit of a joke, isn’t it?’

‘Benny.’ He unfolded his arms, rubbed his eyes with his fingers, drew them down his weary face. ‘You are ill. Denson’s right, you are dying. I won’t lie about that, it’s the truth and you have a right to know it. I’m sorry. But just because you have a... a terminal illness doesn’t mean we’re about to give up on you.’

‘I heard you,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘I heard you talking about shape-shifting, about the problems of maintaining a human form.’

He leant back in the chair. ‘You’re not making sense now,’ he said quietly. ‘You just said I was really me, not some changeling. You said I’d been taken over, not replaced.’

‘I heard you,’ she repeated. ‘So what were you talking about all innocent, then?’

He licked his lips, hesitated for a moment. ‘About Jason,’ he said.

‘Jason?’

‘Denson did a post-mortem on the body of the creature you killed.’

‘Creature?’ She almost laughed. ‘I killed my husband. I pounded the life out of him after he’d been taken over by whatever’s got into you.’ She broke off, a half-sob escaping from her mouth, as if she was only now realizing what she had said. ‘I killed him,’ she repeated, almost in surprise. Then, more emphatically, her voice trembling: ‘Stone cold dead.’

‘No.’ Braxiatel was shaking his head. ‘We didn’t want to tell you until we were sure. But you killed a shape-changer, a chameleon creature that took on the form and personality of Jason Kane. That even thought it was Jason Kane, I believe.’

Now Benny did sit down. She sagged into the chair Braxiatel had indicated earlier and stared at him in amazement. ‘Oh, very clever,’ she whispered. ‘Very clever indeed. So that’s how you explain away the fact that the man I killed is out there with a gun searching for me.’

‘No, Benny,’ he said again. ‘You’ve got it all wrong.’

‘Have I?’ She didn’t believe him for a moment. ‘How do I know the Jason out there now isn’t the shape-changer? If there is one?’

‘It took me a while to work it out,’ Braxiatel admitted. ‘And you were right, it’s all to do with Watkinson, to do with what happened on Paracletes.’ He slowly stood up, thrust his hands into his jacket pockets as he spoke. ‘But once I saw that, I knew what to ask. And now I know what happened here - then and now.’

‘And how do you know that?’ she asked.

‘I know because of what B-Aaron discovered. You never read his message, did you? You found you were ill before you read it, forgot about it. That’s a pity, he’s discovered a lot. And I know what’s happened to you because of what the Oracle told me.’

The gun was cold and hard as he closed his hand around the butt, hoping she would not detect the movement. He smiled, trying to distract her attention. He wondered if he often stood

with his hands in his jacket pockets, or did he look odd? He honestly could not remember right now.

‘You spoke to the Oracle?’ she asked. ‘About me?’

He shook his head. Any movement, any distraction. ‘No,’ he said. ‘About Jason. Or rather, as I now know from

B-Aaron’s rather hurried communiqué of a few minutes ago, about the shape-shifter Kebara.’

She looked up at him from the chair. Worry and confusion were mixed on her face. He had no idea how much time he had, how much of a threat she represented to him. ‘And I’m supposed to believe you, am I?’ she asked.

‘It’s the truth,’ he told her. ‘That’s what the truth is for. Believing. Have a little faith.*

Her eyes narrowed slightly. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘Tell me what the Oracle had to say.’

THE TEARS OF THE ORACLE

'Tell me about Watkinson.'

'Is that a question?' the Oracle asked.

Braxiatel nodded. 'If you like, yes. It's a request, certainly. Why did he come here?'

'That, you already know I think.'

Braxiatel sighed. 'He came for revenge, revenge for the death of his friend.' Silence. 'Didn't he?' Braxiatel shouted suddenly.

The Oracle's answer was immediate, as if in surprise. 'He did.'

'Is that what you wanted me to ask about before? When you volunteered the information about Jason Kane?'

'There is much that you should know,' she said.

'I'll take that as yes, then.' He was pacing up and down in front of her, his anger and emotion barely concealed. 'Watkinson came here to take revenge.' He stopped, pointed up at the Oracle's face, snapping his fingers like a pistol shot as he did. 'To take revenge on you.'

'You know he did.'

Braxiatel nodded, i do now.' He resumed his pacing. 'So he must have brought with him a weapon, something he thought would serve his purpose, could destroy or at least harm you. And given that I don't believe in coincidence, I think that weapon was whatever he found on Paracletes. Or whatever found him.'

There was silence again for a while, broken only by the faint sigh of the breeze as it shifted the grains of sand, rolled them over each other.

'We spoke a lot.' The Oracle's voice was quiet, barely more than a breeze itself. 'He sent his shuttle off into space, on autopilot. So he and I were alone, together. I watched him

wrestle with the creature within his mind, saw him struggle to escape it, to keep it under control. I saw him die.'

'Tell me about the creature.'

'It found him on Paracletes. It had waited there for many years, waited for a host. It found Edward Watkinson. He did not know at first, but the others did. He thought they had turned on him, that they were the ones who were ill. Only - later, when they were all dead, did he look within himself and realize the truth. Only then did he see that he too was dying, only then did he know that it was he who had killed his fellows, because of the creature within him.'

'So he brought it here,' Braxiatel said quietly. 'He brought it to you.'

'He did. It feeds on the mind, on the certainties and beliefs that its host holds dearest. In Watkinson it fed on his belief in his colleagues, his respect for his friends, his certainty in his own abilities. But he was strong enough to see what was happening. The creature jumps from host to host, staying with each until the last drop of nourishment is gone, until the host is 'Incompletely exhausted, brought to the very gateway of death.'

'So, explain the other deaths. Watkinson's expedition. Follett and Garshal.'

The Oracle turned, looking out towards where Garshal's body was now covered by the slowly shifting sands. 'It needs to feed outside the host too. It needs enough energy to subdue a strong host, to maintain its hold, to stay hidden within. It sucks the goodness from them, from the mind and also from the body.'

'And Watkinson, knowing he was infected, that he had this parasite inside him, brought it here.' Braxiatel took a long breath.

'He brought it to me,' the Oracle said. 'He found the tunnel Mikelz had made, still intact. And he brought it to me. That was his revenge - on me and on the creature. I watched him die, consumed from within. The process was hastened as there was no one else for it to feed on. Only me. And it could not, would not kill the only other possible host. When

he died, the creature came. My mind was filled with its presence. What I knew became uncertain. The future blurred, became indistinct.' Her voice was strained, Braxiatel could hear the anguish below the surface. 'I was made blind.'

'So how did you deal with it? I imagine Watkinson hoped it would torment you for eternity, and that it would never be able to escape from you. So what happened?'

'It fed on the activity in my mind. The impulses, thoughts, beliefs and faith.'

'Of course.' He put his hands to his face. 'You switched off your AI functions. And when the artificial intelligence was gone, the creature was starved.'

'Perhaps,' the Oracle said, 'it too slept as I did. But perhaps it was in torment, writhing and alone. I do not know, I cannot see into my own dreams.'

'But it didn't die, that's the important thing.'

'When I was reawakened, it left me.'

Braxiatel nodded, it wasn't going to wait around for you to do the same thing again, so it found another host. Anyone who was close by, within sight, I guess, as it seems it enters through the optic nerve.' He paused, then asked: 'And how, exactly, did you come to reawaken?'

'The one you called Jason Kane awoke me.'

Again the temple was silent. Braxiatel was still, silent, thinking. 'The creature found Jason,' he said at last. 'Or whoever Jason was. It killed Follett and Garshal to supplement its feeding on his mind. And then when that was exhausted, when it had sapped all his confidence, it crossed to Benny.' He turned back to the Oracle. 'This creature is there now, isn't it? Inside her mind, undermining her confidence in everything and everyone she holds dear, in everything she believes, in whatever faith she has left.' He took a step forward, his whole body tense with emotion, it's in there, and you knew.' His face crumpled. 'And you didn't tell me,' he shouted, his voice echoing round the ruins. He collapsed suddenly to his knees. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

The Oracle's answer was almost lost in her sobs. 'Because you never asked,' she said.

SHOWDOWN

Benny sat watching him; she felt empty inside. Nothing. 'And this thing is inside me now?'

Braxiatel nodded, his hands still thrust into his pockets. 'It jumped across, probably in the moment of weakness after you thought you'd killed Jason. It's been in there, Benny, sapping your strength, turning you against us. Your greatest strength is your friends, that's why you no longer trust us. That's why you have to let us help you.'

'No,' she said quietly. 'A good story, but no.'

'Why not?' The exasperation was clear in his voice.

'Because it doesn't add up. Nearly, but not quite.' She watched him carefully, looking for any threatening move at all. 'Jason wasn't lacking in self-confidence at the end. Quite the reverse. He was up to asking me to sacrifice myself for him.'

'But that's it, can't you see?' His voice was raised. He was almost shouting at her now. 'He knew he was infected. Knew he was dying. He thought that if you became the host, the creature would leave him, and he'd be fine. Maybe it told him that, it certainly let him believe it. But he was already dying.'

'You say!' she shouted back. 'You say, but you have no proof for any of this.' She shook her head. 'There's nobody I can ask, nobody I can trust any more.'

'There is one person you can be sure of,' he said.

But she ignored him. 'Jason showed none of the symptoms you say I have.'

'No.' His voice was slightly calmer now. 'No, *Jason* didn't. But he wasn't Jason. Kebara, the shape-changer - he showed the symptoms.'

'What do you mean?'

‘I think, by the end, he’d lost all idea, all memory, of who or what he really was. He actually believed he was Jason Kane. That was how he was afflicted.’ He pulled his left hand from his pocket and held up his finger, jabbing in the air to emphasize his words. ‘What is it that a shape-changer must have most confidence in? Must hold on to with absolute certainty? I’ll tell you, it’s his sense of self. And Kebara lost that. He became absorbed into the role he was playing to such an extent that he forgot it was a role.’

‘Maybe he wasn’t the only one,’ Benny shot back.

He turned away, waving his hand in frustration. ‘I don’t know what more I can offer, what I can say.’

‘It’s what you don’t say that’s important,’ Benny replied.

‘What?’

‘You came to my wedding. Or at least, you will do, in your future. But for me it’s already happened.’

He turned back. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying that if you’re telling the truth and you are who you claim, why didn’t you - why won’t you warn me about Jason, even if it only seems to be Jason? At the wedding.’

He shook his head in disbelief, his mouth open incredulously. ‘But that’s -’

‘Against the rules? So what? When have you ever played by the rules?’ She looked straight at him. ‘You’d find a way, however cryptic, don’t tell me you wouldn’t.’

‘All right,’ he said after a short while. ‘All right, I suppose I would. In which case, I did.’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure? You haven’t forgotten? Lost confidence in your ability to understand what I meant, however cryptic?’

She frowned, trying to remember. Had she missed something, some nuance or form of words? Could she even remember that day all that well? ‘I...’ she said, ‘I...’

Braxiatel snorted with frustration and turned away again, one hand waving in the air in dismissal, the other still in his jacket pocket. ‘This is getting us nowhere. We need to get this thing out of your head, out of your mind.’

'Which means I let you put me out, let you operate in some way.' She shook her head.

His jacket pocket.

Why was his hand in his jacket pocket?

What else was in his jacket pocket?

She realized even as he started to draw out the gun. She was on her feet before it cleared his pocket, launching herself across the room at him even as he brought the gun to bear, as

he closed his other hand on it to steady his aim.

They collided as he fired. The gun snapped upward as his arm buckled. Her shoulder crashed into his chest and knocked him flying as the shot thudded into the ceiling above them.

Braxiatel was on his back, one arm flailing as he tried to get up. The gun was skidding across the floor. Benny was on her hands and knees, crawling after the gun.

She got there just ahead of him, grabbed the gun, felt the handle warm in her hand, swung it up.

He was standing over her, hands open, palms towards her to show they were empty. 'Benny,' he said quietly, 'reasonably. 'Benny, you have to believe what I've told you.'

She was still on the floor, holding the gun pointing up at him as she backed slowly away. She rocked back on to her feet, still crouching, wiping a tear from her eye with her free hand.

He moved, took a short step towards her.

'Stand still,' she screamed at him.

'Benny...'

'I said stand still!'

'Benny, please...' His movement was more sudden this time, he feinted to one side, then leapt at her.

She fired the gun.

The shot caught him as he jumped at her, slammed his body sideways, into the wall. He crashed down across the desk, head snapped back, body arced from the force of the impact. Then he collapsed to the floor and was still.

PREOCCUPATIONS

Contrary to the warship's expectations, God came to the B-Aaron. One of his spherical yellow remotes, complete with smiley-face icon, appeared at the main airlock and bumped politely against the door to be let in. It had crossed over from another ship, the J-Kibb, that was lying at grav-anchor close by. Probably, B-Aaron now realized, the ship had been there to keep an eye on him.

'Can you penetrate my stealth field?' B-Aaron asked as the drone made its way to the main flight deck.

'Oh no,' God admitted. 'But I could always tell where you were. And of course you were sending reports off to Clarence, which was a great help.'

'You intercepted them?'

'Not in the sense you mean. But I read them all.'

'So what happens to me now?' B-Aaron's voice was a mixture of trepidation and resignation.

'Like I said, we need to chat.' God, by contrast, was more upbeat. The yellow drone bobbed about, inspecting the warship's instrumentation with apparent interest. 'This isn't some Old-Testament-style retribution kick we're on here,' God said. 'I just think we both have some questions we could do with the answers to.'

'My question is,' said B-Aaron, 'what the hell's going on?'

'Well, we're agreed on that at least.'

'I think I can work most of it out now,' B-Aaron said. 'But you're right, I was slow. It all started with the new treaty. You thought you could get time travel sorted out quite quickly, but that proved not to be the case. Am I right?'

'Pretty much. !Cin-ta!x and his people weren't nearly as far along as I thought. Or as they thought either, come to that.

So I needed to get them some help. A leg-up if you like.'

‘From the Oracle of the Lost,’ B-Aaron said.

God’s remote spun lazily round, as if taking in the whole of the flight deck. ‘That’s right. The Oracle Technology the Delfans pioneered filled a few of the bigger gaps. But Delfus-Orestes was too far out of our space. Even with the revised treaty I couldn’t just send the Temporal Interest Group to go and look. That would have precipitated a war if nothing else did. But at least I knew where it was, which is more than most people do.*

‘So instead of one of the People, you sent an alien. Someone with no accountability.’

‘I considered sending Clarence,’ God said, almost wistfully. ‘Or even Benny. But a complete outsider seemed safer. You never know where people’s allegiances lie these days.’ A significant pause, then: ‘Do you?’

‘Is friendship a concept I understand?’ B-Aaron asked. ‘Or am I kidding myself?’

‘You seem to have it pretty much. So far as I can tell. Kebara had no friends, he was a mercenary,’ God went on. ‘He was very old when I contacted him. He’s been around for an extremely long time. Seen it all. They say he taught the Ninjucoids a thing or two about mimicking raw DNA strands. But first I just needed someone to get the technology. He was handy and willing.’

‘And ask a question,’ B-Aaron pointed out.

‘And ask a question,’ God said. ‘It was an obvious thing to do. Though I don’t mind admitting that the answer surprised me.’

‘So then you had to work out how Benny and Braxiatel could be significant, and on whose side.’

‘Oh no, I could see that was a loser from the start,’ God said. ‘So I decided instead to keep them preoccupied, make sure they took no part in the war on either side. No prizes for guessing where Braxiatel’s first allegiance lies. After himself, that is.’ The remote stopped spinning, the face on it taking on a puzzled expression for a moment. ‘That’s interesting,’ it said. Then without elaborating further, went on: ‘The difficult thing was finding out what would keep Braxiatel so

preoccupied he had no time for the war, when and if it came. Benny was straightforward enough.'

'The Oracle?'

'Yes. Nice and easy, since I'd already found it. The only problem was that according to the simulations I ran, only Jason Kane had a better than about eighty per cent chance of persuading her it was real and worth a look.'

B-Aaron was already checking back through the simulation data. 'And you had a less than seven per cent probability that he would help, that he would take Benny to KS-159 for you.'

The God-face slid up and down the sphere in an approximation of a nod.

'So you sent Kebara, disguised as Jason Kane,' B-Aaron said.

'Exactly. He studied our simulations of Kane until he knew every character nuance, could predict his behavioural pattern to ninety-seven per cent or more.'

'So what went wrong?'

'What indeed?' God asked. 'Watch this and tell me what you think.' An image formed on the main screen of the flight deck. It was a man's face - Jason Kane. 'It's the last contact I had with Kebara,' God said.

LAST MESSAGE TO GOD

It was the eyes that gave it away. Not that they were unlike Jason Kane's, but they were fractured, cracked across. As if one crooked side of each was Kane; the other was the shape-shifter. Blue against green; round pupil extending into stretched oval; whites bleeding into dark red.

'I haven't much time,' the face said. The voice was also cracked, old and dry. Then the creature cleared its throat, a brittle rattle of sound. When it continued, the voice was Jason Kane's. 'We have arrived with no problems and they've started the excavations. I'll report again - again -' The features convulsed into a deep frown. The red of the eyes was fading, growing paler. 'Again...'

The mouth hung open for a moment. Then the figure on the screen shook its head. 'Who are you?' it asked in apparent amazement. 'Just who the hell are you? Why am I...?' Jason/Kebara looked round, as if checking he was alone. 'Look, I don't know what you want, but if you contact me again I'll... I'll...' His voice tailed off. Then he buried his head in his hands. A sob burst through and the eyes were just visible through the creature's fingers. 'God! Oh God!'

The figure seemed to regain control, wiping its hands down its drawn face, blinking rapidly several times. The eyes were clear when it finished. 'I - am - Jason - Kane,' it whispered. 'Jason Keb- Kane.' The eyes closed with a sigh. The figure leant back in the chair. 'Kane. Jason Kane,' it repeated. 'Benny, I -'

Then, suddenly, the eyes flicked open again. There was anger in them now as Jason stared out of the screen. 'Are you Kebara?' he demanded. 'Is that it?'

A hand was raised, something in it. Traveling at speed towards the screen. Then the screen seemed to shatter, to

split across in a crooked line that mirrored the creature's broken eyes.

DATA INPUT

There was silence on the flight deck for a while. The yellow sphere that was God's image was stationary, fixed in space facing the main screen as it faded to grey.

'I'm glad it's not just me who can be slow on the uptake,' B-Aaron said in what he hoped was an ironic tone. But not too ironic.

'That tells you something it doesn't tell me?' God asked.

'The fact that you need to ask tells me that you aren't monitoring my incoming communications,' B-Aaron said. 'And it rather confirms what the Oracle told Braxiatel.'

'Hang on a moment,' God said. 'I've got data coming in from another source. I just need to readjust the priority settings and give you both my fullest attention. There.' The icon's smile widened. 'Do go on.'

'My turn to show you something,' B-Aaron said as the main screen flickered back into life. 'I stopped off to ask a favour of Zeb'Lan on my way to the House. On my way to see you, I now realize. I'm surprised you didn't find it lying about in the datascape,' he added.

'Contrary to popular myth,' God said, 'I can't be everywhere.'

She had to get out, had to find somewhere to rest, to think. Her first thought was to head back to the temple, to ask the Oracle what the hell was going on, whether Braxiatel had spoken to her as he claimed.

Braxiatel.

Who was now lying dead where she had shot him in his room. First Jason, now Braxiatel.

As she reached the main door, it started to open. She swung round, charged off down the spinal corridor towards her own room. Where else could she go?

Behind her, she could hear shouts. She glanced over her shoulder, saw Denson watching her. She saw the stocky dark-haired man who claimed to be Chris Cwej push past Denson and charge after her. He was holding a gun. She spun on her heels and squeezed off another shot. The stocky man kept running, but his feet seemed to have stopped working, and he skidded along, collapsing on to his back and sliding several metres.

Benny was at her room now. She almost fell through the door and slammed it shut behind her. She leant back on it, panting, gasping. 'Anyone...' she tried to shout, still desperate for breath. 'Anyone... who comes through that door... I'll kill them.'

Then she dragged the bed back in front of the door, *deja vu*.

'Professor Summerfield.' The voice came from behind her. Above her, it seemed. It was polite, quiet, almost apologetic. Slightly high-pitched and nasal. She swung round, the gun raised. 'You really must try to keep your room more tidy,' Joseph said. He was bobbing agitatedly close to the ceiling, apparently looking down at the mess. 'This will take for ever to clear up,' he complained.

Benny collapsed to the floor, giggling helplessly. 'Oh, Joseph, Joseph,' she said. 'I need to talk to someone, and I guess you'll do.' She managed to stop laughing and looked up at the small white ball, in fact, you may be the only one left I can talk to.'

SIMULATION

The measurements were exact. B-Aaron had got them from Braxiatel. Or rather, Braxiatel had earlier given him the address and code-ident of the satellite system round KS-159 where the GPS-augmented data from the dig was stored and processed. B-Aaron had fed the data straight to Zeb'Lan as input to the simulation.

Kebara was an unknown quantity so far as Braxiatel and B-Aaron were concerned. Luckily, Zeb'Lan had the data from watching him as he sat through the initial simulations, gathered through force of habit rather than necessity. Before Kebara became Jason Kane.

Because of the severe time restrictions that Zeb'Lan had been working under, and the fact that B-Aaron had been at pains to ensure that this simulation got no priority or attention that might make it conspicuous, the rendering was crude. The parameters, the behaviour and the geometry were exact, but the whole scenario was realized still as a wire-frame model. Some of the surfaces were filled in with solid blocks of colour - the floor and walls in particular - but most were depicted only by their vertices and edges.

For a few seconds the scene was empty and still. Slab of floor, crude uprights, wire-frame outlines of where the dust and debris was scattered across the floor. A hole where the entrance way had been fashioned. A blocky representation of the Oracle sat less than majestically at the back of the scene.

Then a figure appeared in the entrance, its smooth movement belying the crude rendering. Kebara climbed slowly through the entrance, head swinging to and fro as he took in the magnificent view that was denied those watching the simulation. He made his way across the chamber, pausing, perhaps gaping, at the sight of the Oracle herself. The viewpoint tracked the figure as it approached the dais, as

it stumbled towards the Oracle. A set of lines resolved itself into an instrumentation panel as the figure approached, still stumbling forward as if drawn.

Then it snagged its foot on a broken flagstone, the shattered edges represented by a tracery of fracture lines. The figure lurched sideways, colliding with the panel, sliding down it, grabbing for support and knocking the instruments on its surface. But the figure continued to fall. The viewpoint changed again, a close view of the figure's head as it cracked against the panel, snapped backward. Then out again for a final full view of Kebara crashing to the floor. Behind him the angles of the Oracle realigned slightly as it shifted its position. As it awoke.

POISONED CHALICE

That's just one predictive scenario,' B-Aaron said. 'It could have happened any number of ways, but the probability of that one is slightly higher. When Kebara cracked his head, he was disoriented for a short while. Long enough for the creature to get inside his head.'

God's yellow sphere bounced around in agitation as B-Aaron streamed Braxiatel's diagnosis direct to its remote systems. It scanned them for intrusion measures before uploading them to God.

'The creature uses the innate telepathic abilities of the host mind to transmit itself into subsequent victims,' B-Aaron said after the briefest of pauses to allow God to assimilate the data. 'You must already know that unlike any of the People, the Oracle is telepathic.'

'It's partly how it foretells the future,' God agreed. 'In fact our lack of any telepathic ability is one of the limiting factors that !Cin-talx ran into with the time experiments. So the Oracle acted as a host for this parasite, gave it houseroom as it were.'

'Until Kebara stumbled into the chamber and reactivated the Oracle,' B-Aaron said. 'The first thing it attacked in Kebara's psyche was his sense of self.'

'Essential for a shape-shifter,' God agreed. 'That would be an overriding sense, a point of certainty.'

'The parasite, or so Braxiatel thinks, feeds on the mind's faith and belief, converting certainty into doubt and using up the host's mental and physical energies to do it until the host dies of menial exhaustion.'

'So it fed on Kebara's belief in who he really is,' God said.

'And we just saw the end of the process. Kebara ended up believing himself to be Jason Kane. That's why he never reported back to you.'

There was a pause before God asked: 'And Braxiatel said you could tell me all this? Knowing, or at least suspecting, what I actually did to keep *him* preoccupied?'

B-Aaron was silent for a while. 'He gave me a list of things to make sure you understood,' he said eventually. 'They make no sense to me, but I guess they're not supposed to.'

'And do I have all the pieces yet?' God asked. 'From the other data I'm receiving I think matters are rapidly coming to a head.'

B-Aaron checked its memory banks. 'The parasite seems to be transmitted via dormant telepathic influence of the dying host,' he said, 'it feeds on beliefs, the stronger the better, and undermines them. The Oracle says that the war is avoidable, but it is "in the laps of the gods", whatever that may mean.'

'I see some of it, I think,' God said. His icon was set into a puzzled expression, is that it?'

'Just about. He did say to be sure to give you his regards.'

'Thanks.' God, at least, had mastered irony as a tone of voice.

'He also says he knows that you planted a cup in his sack, but it's in danger of becoming a poisoned chalice. Or a cure-all. Whatever that means.'

'It means,' said God, rolling his remote's eyes upward, 'that he knows. It means that he has always known. And given the circumstances, I'd say it means you should get as far from the Ship that's off your port bow as you possibly can in the next minute or so.'

'I thought it was keeping tabs on me,' B-Aaron said.

'It was. And since you're not telepathic, be thankful it's not linked directly into your systems,' said God. 'Like it is into mine.'

* * *

Despite its bulk, the B-Aaron could be underway very fast. So could the J-Kibb, the Ship that lay off its port bow. As B-Aaron came round a few degrees and blasted its way out of orbit, so the J-Kibb also began to turn. But the other way. As

soon as it was oriented correctly, its vortex engines cut in, under the direct control of God. The Ship itself had little time to realize that its main systems had been overridden, and less to enquire why. Most of its analytical abilities were in any case more concerned with something it was doing several light years away. That took priority, and if God wanted to shift the physical manifestation of the Ship while its remote drone was elsewhere occupied on God's behalf and at God's behest, then so be it.

B-Aaron stood off a few parsecs away, monitoring the J-Kibb as its main drive engaged and it headed at full speed out of the People's space.

FINALE

'I suppose it really began back on Dellah. There's nothing like having a home,' she said quietly, 'an infrastructure you can rely on, to make you take things for granted. Friends, for example. Former friends. Colleagues. People you trusted, relied on. You only appreciate them when they're not there any more. When they're gone, taken from you or set aside. Not trustworthy, suborned. Whatever. It's not even that you miss them sometimes, just that they're not there any more.'

'Then how can you tell when a friend is a friend?' Joseph asked. 'Being only a machine I have no concept of friendship, though I understand loyalty to an extent.'

'I don't know. Nobody does, I guess. It's all down to trust. Faith. Belief. That's the problem, isn't it? Edward Watkinson knew that, that's what he was trying to say in his final lecture. I don't think he was even saying he should have trusted Mikelz's judgement, should have believed in his vision and given him the funding. I don't think he regretted that at all. He was working in his friend's best interests, only his friend didn't see it that way. Didn't appreciate it.' She bit her lip, thinking about what she had just said.

The gun was heavy in her hand, but she was not about to put it down. She would need it soon, she knew that now. She could see the way out of the dilemma. Either way, whoever was telling the truth, there was a single sure way out.

'I don't understand these allusions,' Joseph said. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's OK. You're a good listener. I expected no more from you than that. You can't make judgement calls, or evaluate emotions, or...' She hesitated. 'Or be a friend. But you're the best friend I have right now. The others are dead, or gone, or...' Her voice tailed off.

‘So, Mikelz went off on his own anyway,’ she said after a while. ‘He didn’t appreciate what his friend tried to do for him then. Later he did, when it was too late. But at first he was filled with enthusiasm, with certainty. He was so *sure*. So certain that he took his colleague and his wife with him.’ She hefted the gun, lifting it and letting her hand fall back into the cradle of her other palm. ‘And look what happened to them.’

‘And to Watkinson,’ Joseph said.

‘True. But he went into it with his eyes open. He knew what he was doing. He had no alternative, really.’ Benny lifted the gun, pointed it straight between her own eyes. ‘Any more than I have,’ she murmured. For a moment she stayed frozen in position, then slowly, she lowered the gun again. ‘And, anyway, it all made perfect sense to Watkinson,’ she said.

And suddenly it all made perfect sense to her too. ‘Oh God,’ she said. ‘What have I done?’ She looked up at Joseph, her face drained as the enormity of it all struck home. ‘He was telling the truth, wasn’t he? His story is the only one that all the facts fit. My story is just full of discrepancies, of the unexplained.’ She exhaled, long and slow. ‘Some storyteller I’d make. Some archaeologist.’

‘Don’t be too hard on yourself, Benny.’ Joseph dipped down, so that he was hovering close to her. ‘How could you possibly have known?’

She was crying now. Soundlessly the tears were welling up in her eyes, rolling down her grimy cheeks. ‘I told him to say something at my wedding. To warn me.’ She tried to wipe away some of the tears with one hand. With the other she still held the gun. ‘I said he never warned me, he never tried.’ She looked up at Joseph and abandoned wiping at the tears. ‘But he did. In his cryptic, oracle fashion, he told me then. All those years ago. And I never saw it.’

She closed her eyes, and in her memory Braxiatel was smiling at her. He was holding a champagne glass. He was saying: ‘Do you have any more idea what he’s like? I hope you find out soon, there may be questions.’

She opened her eyes, hoping to dispel the image. But he was still there. 'The older he gets, the more interested in him you'll be,' Braxiatel said with a sad smile. Then Jason was falling away, his head a bloody pulp, and his features aged almost beyond recognition as she stood over him with the lamp heavy in her hand.

Like the gun.

'The Oracle had the right idea,' Benny said. And she raised the gun again, pointed it at her head.

'No, wait,' Joseph said, his voice rising in pitch, anxious.

'Only this time, there's no host for you.' She was speaking to herself, ignoring the small white ball as it spun in an ever-faster circle. 'Nowhere to go. Just me and a machine, a dumb unthinking machine without a real thought in its electronic brain. Nowhere for you to go.'

The gun was close to her face, she was staring down the dark emptiness of the barrel. She called out, for the unseen watchers. 'I know you're listening, maybe even watching, my friends. I know the truth now. And you'll know not to come in. Just seal this place up and get the hell out of here.' There was silence. 'Maybe you've already gone,' she said quietly. 'I wouldn't blame you. Another solution.' She laughed suddenly. 'But since I'm dying anyway,' she said to her self again, to the thing inside her mind, 'even without your help, whatever you are...'

She was on her feet now, bracing herself, feet apart. She could feel the tension on the trigger, feel it slightly slippery under her moist finger. It was difficult to keep the gun aimed, angled back towards her like this. But she held it steady, pointed it right between her eyes, ignored Joseph's pleas to reconsider, blotted everything from her thoughts except the gun.

And pulled the trigger.

The sound was deafening in the enclosed space. The shot caught Benny almost exactly midway between the eyes.

She never heard the echoes die away, never felt the floor as her body was slammed backward on to it.

The creature knew what she was doing. It was so closely tied to her conscience, to her thoughts, that it knew with all the certainty that Benny did that she was about to pull the trigger.

But it also knew something that she did not. It might operate only instinctively, it might have no conscious thought of its own, but it knew there was a new source of food near by. A rich host that the woman had dismissed as inconsequential. And as Benny's finger tightened on the trigger, as the shot left the barrel, so the creature made the painful, terrible jump into the other mind.

At once it was reassured by what it found. It was safe. There was so much here, such thoughts to feast on, such nourishment. The tiny mind itself was just an extension of a far larger intelligence, and the creature slipped at once into the greater part. And as it explored its new environment, it found avenues and pathways, networks of connections that could take it directly from this mind into others. Millions of others.

There was no need for caution now. No need to lie almost dormant and drip-feed from the thoughts and desires and emotions. It could take the lot, swallow it whole, be sated for the first time in its long life, and then move on. And on and on.

Even as Benny's body hit the floor, and as the small white sphere that she had called Joseph dropped to the ground beside her, the creature was already at work. It was already taking everything from the artificially intelligent mind of the host that it now knew called itself J-Kibb.

* * *

Heaven was very noisy. She could hear talking, close by. When she opened her eyes, the noise stopped. An angel was

standing over her, which at first rather confirmed her idea of where she was.

But then, as her vision blinked clear, she saw that it was Clarence.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked cautiously.

She was lying on her bed, she realized. As she pushed herself up and looked round she saw that the furniture had been removed and stacked in a corner, and the bed was away from the door. They were all there, crowded round the bed - Clarence, Denson, Winston, Jason. And Braxiatel and the dark, broad-shouldered man who said he was Chris Cwej.

‘How do you feel?’ Jason asked, taking her hand, holding it tightly in both of his.

‘I feel great,’ she said. And she realized that she did. She could feel inside her mind that she was free of it. Really free. It was like the moment after the air conditioning cut out, the moment when you became aware of the fact that it had been on in the first place. Now, with the creature gone she realized what it had been like when it was there, inside her. Manipulating her.

She sat up. ‘At the risk of sounding like a bimbo in a cheap B-movie,’ she said, ‘there’s just one thing I don’t understand.’

In answer, Jason handed her the gun. It was the same gun, she was sure of it. ‘You thought we wanted to kill you,’ he said quietly. ‘There have been times,’ he added with a grin. ‘But this wasn’t one of them.’

‘I know now that you weren’t.’ So that was it. ‘Stun gun?’ <

Denson said, ‘Not exactly. A real percussion weapon, i They all are. But loaded with anaesthetic capsules.’

‘But you believed you were killing yourself,’ Braxiatel said. ‘And what you believed, so did the creature inside you.’

‘So it legged it,’ she murmured. ‘Very wise.’ She handed back the gun, looked round at them all. ‘Where exactly did it go?’ she asked.

* * *

As soon as his links into J-Kibb's mind told him that it was dying, God got out. Fast. Already he had isolated the Ship from everything else. Now he cut all the network links and external access. The Ship was dead and, since it was not in any way telepathic, the creature was trapped.

But not for long. It would escape eventually, God knew. As soon as it came into contact with sentient life that was telepathic, that could reach in and provide it with a pathway out. But that was Braxiatel's point. And the Ship was already heading for its final destination.

The ball was cold and inanimate. A plain white sphere that fitted snugly inside Benny's palm. 'Joseph,' she said quietly. 'Poor Joseph.'

'Or whatever his name was,' Jason said.

Braxiatel coughed. 'I wouldn't waste your sympathy on him,' he said. 'You were right, the creature could never have used a simple near-mindless droid like a university porter as a host.'

'So what happened?'

Cwej said, 'Joseph wasn't a university porter, never was. Despite appearances.'

Benny frowned. 'But you, despite appearances, really are Chris?'

He shuffled uncomfortably. 'It's only skin deep,' he mumbled.

Jason slapped him on the shoulder. 'But that's deep enough these days, isn't it?'

'Thanks.' Cwej glared at him. 'I really needed that, you know.'

'Children,' Benny chided. 'You can tell me about it later.' She handed the sphere back to Braxiatel. 'I think I can guess,' she said. 'When did you find out?'

'Well,' he said slowly, avoiding looking at her. 'Do you recall that a long time ago, back on Dellah, Joseph was damaged by a lady with a gun. When Mastrov came to kill you.'

She nodded. 'That's right, you fixed him.'

Braxiatel gave a quick shake of his head. 'Not really. There was nothing much to fix, you see. Just a remote link. A simple drone.'

She stared at him. 'You knew he was a Ship then? Spying on me? Why didn't you tell me?'

'You never asked,' he said quietly, sadly. 'And if I had told you,' he went on, 'Joseph wouldn't have been here. And if he hadn't been here, the creature would have had nowhere to go. And you really would be dead by now.'

She considered this. She supposed she should have realized herself, should have guessed when God once miraculously managed to take over Joseph to give her a message. He hadn't taken over at all, just spoken through a direct link to the Ship. 'That's no excuse,' she said after a while. 'So what was he up to?'

'Well, he was certainly reading your mail. God is aware that you and I are to be main players in the war if there is one,' he said grimly. 'What we need to know now, is whether He sees the creature as a weapon we've deployed against him. Whether we're to be instrumental in preventing that war, or whether we've actually just started it.' He gave the sphere a sudden twist, pulled it apart into two hemispheres. 'Now with a bit of luck,' he murmured as he reached inside one of the halves.

'What are you doing?' Emilia Winston asked.

He put the halves of the sphere back together, then tossed it up into the air, as if releasing a dove. The sphere slowed its ascent as it reached its apogee. And stopped.

'Whoa, it's small in here,' B-Aaron said through the tiny drone. Its facial icon faded into existence on the surface of the ball, scrunched into a small grin.

'Never mind that,' Clarence told it. 'What's happening?'

B-Aaron bobbed around the room, as if trying out the new drone. 'Well, God says thank you, Benny, for the gift. He seems to think it's a fair reciprocation for the one he sent you. And he says thank you, Braxiatel, for the suggestion of what to do with it. In the nicest way, of course.'

‘Which reminds me,’ Braxiatel said quietly, ‘it’s not all joy and champagne.’

‘Indeed not,’ Denson agreed. ‘Benny,’ he asked gently, ‘will you let me do those tests now?’

After the elation at finding she was alive, that she had not killed anyone she loved, that she was free of the creature, it was as if the bottom had fallen out of her world again. She was dying, and she had forgotten. How was that possible? How could life be so unfair? But every day now was a bonus, maybe that was the way to look at it.

She bit back the tears, smiled sadly at her friends. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Do your tests. I trust you.’

QUESTION AND ANSWER

'You ask,' Jason said.

She hesitated.

'Go on, Benny,' he urged.

'All right.'

She wasn't sure what to think any more. So much had happened since they first gathered round the Oracle and asked it about the future. So much. She was still numb from the shock of attempted suicide, still shaken by the realization that she was dying, guilty about the way she had mistrusted her own friends. But perhaps it had all achieved something, something good, some consolation from the hurt and the anguish. They would soon know.

There were just four of them there. Herself, Jason, Braxiatel, and B-Aaron's adopted sphere. And the Oracle. Just one more question to ask, just one more thing to be determined. She asked the Oracle: 'Will there be war? Will what you saw before still come to pass? Or is the future changed?'

'The future is ever changing,' the Oracle said. 'You know that better than anyone now, Bernice Summerfield. There is never certainty, never immutable fact. But I see none of the torment I witnessed before. None of the death, the unending beginning and closure and continuance. The flashpoint is receding even now, dipping below the horizon of probability.' The Oracle paused, then said: 'I see hope.'

'So what has changed?' Benny asked as they walked slowly back towards the base. 'What have we done?'

'The flashpoint, as I told you, was Dellah,' Braxiatel said. 'The gods that emerged there, if they get out into the rest of the universe, would cause havoc. Religious fervour sweeping through the galaxy, faith and belief running riot. Inquisitions

and torture. People murdered for their lack of beliefs. Friendships torn asunder. We've seen it on one world, seen the results, the deaths. Now imagine that on a cosmic scale.'

'And they would blame God.'

'Who would you blame? People always have to blame someone, you know.'

'And They would blame God too. I mean *They* with a capital T.'

Braxiatel nodded.

'So what has changed?' Jason asked. 'You two are the ones who apparently held the fate of the war in your hands. What did you do?'

'Assuming he didn't see it as an attack, and from what B-Aaron tells us he didn't, we gave God a weapon. A way out.'

The drone that had been Joseph and was now linked to B-Aaron dipped down at this, close to Benny's head. 'You gave God a creature that feeds on faith, on belief. His prognosis is that it will burn itself out, overindulge and spread itself so thin that it becomes irrelevant once it's done its job. It will become just like normal everyday paranoia. So God kept it isolated in the Ship, sent it on its way.'

'On its way?' Jason asked. 'To where?'

'Well,' Benny said, 'if you had a creature that feeds on absolute convictions and saps faith, and you also had a world where religious fanaticism, fervent creeds and extreme beliefs were running riot... Where would you send it?'

The dead Ship that had been J-Kibb was already glowing red from the heat as it entered the atmosphere. Its hull was never designed for close planetary manoeuvres. It was steaming, weakened and breaking apart as it dropped towards the world, shuddering and trembling under the strain.

It tore through the night sky, a shooting star, a portent of what was to come. The explosion was visible for miles, the shock wave felt across the continent, as the Ship smashed itself into the surface of Dellah.

High above the planet, an angel watched the impact, saw the explosion. It waited just long enough to see the first crowds begin to gather round the smoking wreckage. Then it flapped its magnificent wings and started the long journey back to its God.

'You're all right, aren't you, Benny?'

'Yes.'

'I mean, *really* all right.'

She thought about it. She was still alive despite everything that had happened. For the moment. She might be dying, but she wasn't dead. Not in-a-box stone-cold stiff dead. Not by a long way. And she could always have died tomorrow, or next week, or in the next hour, although somehow that was different. The future was unpredictable then, whereas now... It was knowing, seeing the future, that was the problem. It almost made you want to curl up and die right here and now. Almost.

'Yes, Jason. I'm really all right,' she said. 'I've got you back. I've got my friends back. And now I've got me back as well. And I know that next time I lose something important, I won't look any further than my own backyard.' She snuggled in closer, her hand pressed against his chest. 'In fact,' she decided, 'you could say that life has never been so much fun.'

There was silence. Long, comfortable silence. Eventually, as she lay on the half-conscious edge of sleep, feeling warm and safe and loved, he said, so quietly she barely heard: 'We could get married, you know. If you want...'

She did not answer. Not yet. If he thought she was asleep, that was fine. When Jason was asleep, really asleep, she carefully moved his arm from around her shoulder and climbed quietly out of the bed.

Braxiatel was standing in the main living room, as if he had been waiting for her. 'I suppose you'll be getting on with sorting this place out now,' she said.

His head was slightly to one side as he stood watching her. There was the hint of a smile on his face.

'I mean,' she said, 'you'll be drawing up plans, employing architects, redesigning Versailles so it fits on this rock.'

Still he said nothing.

'Getting your collection out of storage.' She shuffled her feet, wondering what he was thinking about, why he wasn't commenting. 'What is it? Look, I'm sorry I never got to go through that catalogue,' she said. 'And I guess I shan't get the chance now. What with... you know.'

He took her hand, he really was smiling now. 'You might,' he said.

She frowned, pulling her hand free. 'If you think I'm spending what's left of my life going through some stuffy list of art treasures and *bijouterie*'s -' she started.

He shook his head. 'If you had looked at the catalogue,' he said, 'you might have noticed that I happen to own the *Riedel Manuscript*. It's well worth a read.'

'That rings a bell somewhere.' Benny clicked her tongue, trying to recall what she had heard about Riedel. Magnus Riedel. 'Wait a minute,' she said, 'wasn't he the guy who claimed to have found the Fountain of Forever? You know, stand under it and you get eternal life, or if you'd rather it will cure all -' She broke off, aware that her mouth was hanging open.

Braxiatel was nodding, grinning back at her. 'It's not much to offer,' he said. 'But it's a start. Something that it just might be worth spending the... the next few weeks working on. I have a couple of leads we can follow up.'

She was laughing too. 'Oh, come on, I'm not falling for that one.' She sighed and wiped her eyes. 'You just want to keep me occupied, give me something to do to take my mind off... things. It's just a legend.'

Braxiatel raised an eyebrow.

'Isn't it?' she asked.

'Yes,' he admitted. 'Just a legend. Like the Oracle of the Lost. If you're not sure, why not ask -'

'No,' she said. 'No questions. Not now. I'd rather live with the hope.' She stood for a while, thinking through the events of the last few weeks, considering the possibilities and

opportunities which the next few weeks offered. She took a deep breath. 'Wait here just one minute while I get my rucksack,' she said.

And that was just the beginning.